

Significant Man Syndrome

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Some people inhabit every inch of their body. Their personality is heavy enough to keep every limb in place. For Tonje, however, an entire body was too much to handle. She was gangly as a pubescent boy. When she sat on a chair, her right foot would jiggle uncontrollably – up and down, up and down – sometimes so fast that the jiggle became a tremor and people would start to wonder if she was having some kind of a fit. If she managed to gain control of the foot, her hand would constantly fly up to tuck imaginary strands of hair behind her ear. Especially when she was trying to conduct a conversation with someone. And particularly if that someone was a person she wanted to impress. Or her fingers would take over, fiddling unconsciously and continually with a pencil, a candle, a coffee cup.

On this particular day, the impression of a poorly grounded person was amplified by the fact that she was overdressed. She noticed it the minute she got off the Metro at Blindern Campus and positioned herself in the middle of the crowd racing up the street towards the square where the beer tents were already pitched for Fresher's Week and people in red T-shirts were handing out bags of chewing gum, instant soup and tampons. New skirt, a pale pink blouse. Shoes too smart, pony tail too high.

Tonje's mother had insisted, had taken her to the shopping centre and spoken to the saleswoman in the shop, saying that they needed a blouse, *a decent one*. There was something about the way she said this, something hectic and determined that Tonje had difficulty interpreting as Bjørg tended to take a more passive approach to life. Nor was there any reason why she should pay for Tonje's clothes, since Tonje had spent the whole of her year out after secondary school working as a non-qualified care home assistant, and though she'd paid a bit of rent to help Bjørg out, she'd saved most of her earnings, weaving herself a safety net for her new, independent life. Even so, Bjørg had pulled out her bank card, tapped in her code without so much as a wince even though the price was steep, and then she insisted on going to the café, dragging Tonje up the escalator with her to the bakery on the second floor. Tonje didn't get it at first and only ordered a coffee, but when she saw the disappointment wash across Bjørg's face she realised this must be some kind of rite of passage, must be important, so she ordered marzipan cake as well, a big slice, and let Bjørg pay for that too.

'Well, well,' Bjørg said after they'd found a table, then fell silent again.

They sat there for a while, fiddling with their pastry forks, eyes following the buzzing hordes of humanity streaming in and out of the shops on either side of the space set aside for the café's furniture. Bjørg swallowed a bite of cake and gave a little cough.

‘Looking forward to it, then?’

Tonje was. She *was* looking forward to it. Looking forward to student life, reading lists, academic literature and marker pens, reading rooms and lectures. Maybe a boyfriend, she thought. Long evenings and wine. No limits. Just herself. She was looking forward to it so much that she was all aquiver inside. She could easily have told Bjørg, and indeed she felt like telling her. But as she sat there, mouth stuffed with jam and cream, the bag containing a pink silk blouse at her feet, it felt quite impossible to put her expectations into words in a way that would make sense to Bjørg, that would make her see everything Tonje was picturing to herself. Real words, not artificial babbling. She would rather be kind to Bjørg right now, hide what they both knew deep down, and continue to talk to her on the terms of their old life so that Bjørg wouldn’t be made to feel that Tonje had already left for a completely different place.

‘Oh, yes. It’ll probably be great,’ she said instead.

‘Well, well,’ Bjørg replied.

‘Top-up?’ Tonje asked after a while, to show Bjørg she appreciated her gesture, that it was fine by her if they sat here for a bit longer.

But Bjørg got up abruptly and grabbed her handbag, saying, ‘No, no. We’d best be getting home,’ and they both drew a sigh of relief.

‘Thanks for the blouse, by the way,’ Tonje said as they walked out of the mall

‘My daughter’s starting university,’ Bjørg replied. ‘She needs to look like proper folk.’

When she’d got up earlier this morning and put it on, the blouse had felt cool against her skin. Nice. But that was irrelevant now, because *proper folk* didn’t dress up for their first day at university. Of course they didn’t. Where had that idea come from? *Proper folk* went around in jeans, faded T-shirts, hoodies or plaid flannel shirts with the top buttons undone. *Proper folk* didn’t wear visible makeup either and piled their hair up in messy buns secured with an elastic band, which signalled that these girls had barely glanced at themselves in the mirror before nonchalantly grabbing their books and stuffing them into the huge, battered leather bags they’d inherited from their academic mothers and heading to Blindern campus to enrich their inner selves. They most certainly didn’t wear pink silk blouses that reflected the light, giving them a glow of childish aspiration every time the sun hit them. She huddled in the back row of the auditorium at the Meteorological Institute, right next to the wall, where the light cast by the overhead lamps couldn’t reach her, and resolved to spend the rest of the semester sitting there.

That plan didn't work out. The Professor of Oceanography, Geir Olav Stride, was a man passionately committed to the future of the institute and keen to gain recruits for his own subject. From that perspective, it was hard to say how far he was to blame for what eventually played out. He had no way of knowing that his acknowledgement of Tonje's academic prowess would unleash a wave of sheer insanity in her. After all, he had praised students before without similar results.

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Although the academic year was only a few weeks old and everyone's skin still had that golden summer glow, the rain was lashing down outside the high windows behind the students' hunched backs. Several of them sat with scarves around their necks and jackets lying across their knees or shoulders like rugs. There was a certain comedy value in the fact that the person responsible for the building that housed the Meteorological Institute, whoever that might be, had not registered the abrupt drop in temperature over the past few days, Tonje mused. You'd have thought the people working here would be aware of the existence and eminent usefulness of weather forecasts, but such was obviously not the case. The biting cold metal of the radiator on the wall beside her amplified the sensation that the frost was slowly eating its way into her body. Once it had sunk its teeth into her bones, nothing but a long shower could make it loosen its grip. Tonje wasn't good with the cold. Couldn't cope with it. Her fingers were becoming stiff. She shivered and rubbed her hands frantically up and down her thighs beneath the desk in an attempt to boost her circulation. She thought longingly of the shared shower in the corridor of the student village. If she managed to leave Blindern right after the lecture was over, she could be there before the others got home, early enough to avoid the rattling of the handle on the bathroom door as she turned the water-heater up notch by notch until her skin was almost scalding and the steam filled the room from floor to ceiling with an impenetrable fog. Only then, after twenty minutes, maybe half an hour, would she feel the cold shatter. An inner spring thaw that would abruptly set everything flowing through her again, get all her bodily fluids circulating, stronger than before. Afterwards, she would lie on her bed with a towel wrapped around her head, feeling the pulse in her fingers and toes, relishing the sensation of naked, newly scrubbed skin beneath the duvet. She would doze off and grow warm. Watch some braindead garbage on her laptop as she lay slumbering, that's what she would do. They were a godsend as far as she was concerned, those reality

shows where young, tanned, muscular people in scanty clothing were locked into a house with too few beds and too much alcohol. Of course it was frustrating to hear the participants constantly parroting the refrain about being 110 per cent yourself. It was a logical absurdity. Could the education system really have failed so fundamentally? Yet its entertainment value was unimpeachable and sometimes it even encouraged useful self-reflection. *What kind of boys do you like?*, all the new girls were routinely asked when they checked in, as each of the participants in turn tensed their six-packs. Despite her minimal experience, Tonje was pretty certain that she didn't like boys at all, only men. The kind in aviators who save the world.

She gazed absent-mindedly at Geir Olav who was passing between the rows of benches with a pile of papers: Their first obligatory assignment. They had written about thermohaline circulation and deep water formation.

'Elementary knowledge for anyone concerned with weather, climate and ocean systems,' Geir Olav had said, instructing them to do a thorough job.

Tonje had done so.

He read out names, scanned the room enquiringly for a raised hand or a brief 'here' that could identify the owner of both name and assignment, found the individual concerned and continued. He was thin on top and wore those frameless glasses that are meant to look invisible. She wondered how old he might be; it wasn't easy to guess. Around 50, perhaps? His shirt was badly ironed and buttoned all the way up. His body was thin without being toned. He just looked like someone who wasn't particularly fond of food. Or the pleasures of life in general. But he had an air of determination. A calm authority in the way he addressed his students. He knew what he was doing. The auditorium was his domain.

'Here you go. What a girl!' he whispered as he bent over her from behind and placed the stapled bundle of A4 pages on the desk in front of her.

He appeared so abruptly. No *Tonje Andersen? Do we have a Tonje here?* Did he know who she was? Why? How long had he known? Had he checked her out? Looked her up, found her profile picture on Facebook? His right hand placed itself on her right shoulder and he stood over her as she flipped through to the last page of her paper. As if he was waiting for her to unwrap a present. *Excellent!* It said. Nothing more. Then came the movement, so tiny that it was barely detectable, that no one could see it, that no one *was supposed to* see it; so tiny that she wondered whether she had simply imagined it, although it could not have been her imagination because a movement that has not happened cannot possibly trigger a physical reaction as thoroughly concrete as a shiver. For the shiver happened. It was not her imagination that she shivered when, with the tiniest of twitches, he moved his thumb half a

centimetre to the left and coaxed it very slightly beneath her scarf so that it brushed the bare flesh just beside her throat. It threw a trip switch, a switch she had not known existed.

The train of thought it set in motion was unstoppable. Discreetly, she pulled out her mobile, clicked open her own Facebook profile and studied the image Geir Olav must have seen, looked at it with a gaze she believed to be his. The image had been taken with her mobile camera out on the street one day when she'd been feeling good. Her long dark hair was glossy, freshly washed and tumbled prettily over her shoulders. Her eyes gazed straight ahead, into the camera, open and blue. People were always pointing it out, that strange combination of blue eyes and dark hair. As a child, she'd felt odd. She still did as a matter of fact. But she could see it was a nice picture. The only reason she had long been considering changing it was that it looked too staged. She was too obviously posing. Smiling too stiffly. The selfie arm on the left-hand side of the image was impossible to ignore. Tonje wanted to have a photo where she looked happy in a life-like, believable way. One where she was laughing with her teeth showing. A photo of a moment someone had thought they should capture unbeknownst to her simply because she looked so shiny and happy – that's what she wanted. One that had been sent to her mobile the next day by someone who wrote: *Took this pic of you yesterday. Thought it was really nice :)*. No one had yet sent her that picture. Geir Olav had seen the boring picture. Had he liked it anyway?

His breath had smelt strongly of chewing gum. *Strong peppermint*. Tonje recognised it. The smell of smokers' corner. Secondary school. Maybe he was a secret smoker. Maybe, after all, he was one of those people who did a fair few things on the sly. She peered at him again. Noticed the steadiness of his hands and voice as he picked up a piece of chalk and started to go through the assignment. The constant, confirmatory nods in her direction unleashed a confusing turmoil in her stomach, a quivering sensation that almost drove out the cold. Back at the student village, she forgot to shower, forgot the ongoing drama in the Swedish version of *Paradise Hotel* and lay there staring at the ceiling instead.

'There's something special about you,' he said in the lift up to the institute the next day, with that same whiff of peppermint, and the door glided closed behind him before she managed to get out at the right floor.

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Once someone has told you you're special, you simply have to live up to it. It robs you of your peace of mind. Tonje was well aware of that.

The first time it had happened was when she was almost seven and had only been going to school for a few weeks. She'd been happy there. Then they found out that she could read and everything became a horrendous hassle. It really wasn't Tonje's fault; she'd been prepared to sit quietly at her desk for nine consecutive years. It was Miss who'd started the whole thing. They were going to play hangman, she said one day, since they'd got so good at learning their letters. She drew four dashes and then they had to take turns to guess letters. Everyone laughed when Henriette guessed H three times in a row even though it was wrong. Things were looking bad for the stick man. But they managed it in the end. R E A D, it said.

'Because you can read!' Miss exclaimed enthusiastically.

Then she pointed at Tonje.

'Your turn now. Choose the most difficult word you know!'

'Okay,' said Tonje, then picked up the chalk and drew eighteen white dashes on the dark-green board.

'It has to be a proper word, Tonje. Not just lots of letters one after another.'

Miss wrinkled her forehead, but kept smiling.

'It is,' Tonje replied. 'It's ready now. You can start guessing.'

'Well, I suppose we'll have to try,' said Miss.

And the class guessed.

'O!' shouted Henrik.

'That's right. There are two Os, actually.'

Tonje wrote them down and the others continued to suggest letters.

'Are we supposed to guess letters we haven't learned yet?' asked Hilde Sofie after a while.

'Yes, I think that's what you're going to have to do, actually,' Miss answered. 'You probably know the letters in your own names. Come on!'

At first the stick man did pretty well. Nearly all the letters that were guessed were right. S and Y and A and I and L. But no one could guess the word. The stick man swung.

'Psychopathological,' Tonje said at last, hitching up her trousers.

There was a meeting. Miss and the headteacher were both there. They sat in an office. The headteacher behind his desk and Miss on a chair in the corner. Tonje and Mum were placed side-by-side in front of the desk, so close that Tonje could see all the papers that were piled on top. On the uppermost sheet, the one right in front of the headteacher, it said *Tonje Andersen, 1B* and her date of birth, written in big, sloppy ball-point writing. Beneath that,

Mum's name – *Bjørg Anita* – and a term she hadn't heard before but nonetheless understood: *sole custody*.

Tonje wasn't happy that the school had forced Bjørg to come in. Her mum had whinged about it all afternoon: *There's always something with you, Tonje. What're they after now, them folk?* But in the end, she'd put on her coat and gone anyway. Out in the schoolyard, she'd stopped for a smoke – she certainly knew smoking was strictly prohibited there – and Tonje was terrified Bjørg would get caught, but no one saw them before she stamped out her cigarette on the tarmac with a sigh.

'Well, well. I s'pose we'd best go in and see what them lot have to say.'

The message was brief. Tonje was special, Miss said, as the headteacher nodded in confirmation.

'Gifted,' he said.

He picked up a pen as if he was about to note something down, but quickly looked up at Tonje again through his glasses without making a mark on the sheet covered in ballpoint writing.

'Look at that: 9 November 1989. The same day the wall fell. You came into the world at the same time as the hope of a new age. A new, united Europe. Did you know that, Tonje?'

She shook her head, wriggled silently in her chair and looked over at Mum angrily. It was news to her that the responsibility for the future of the whole of Europe rested on her shoulders.

'Why didn't you tell me that?' she asked her mother when they got home.

'I probably had other stuff on my mind that day apart from people knocking down some wall,' Bjørg answered.

That was the day Tonje became hectic. Urgency took up residence in her. She felt a growing fear that time would simply run out while she was stomping around in the backyard, kicking the gravel. Was afraid that everything she was supposed to get involved in was happening out there somewhere she couldn't quite place, and that she would never manage to get there in time. Her hands and feet started to behave like idling outboard motors.

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The next time an assignment was due, Tonje found it necessary to conduct a systematic review of the debate about the proper way to understand the thermodynamic properties of seawater before she could start to answer the actual question. There was something

compelling about the fact that the description of water was founded not on indisputable laws of nature but on equations that had been deduced empirically through laboratory experiments. As if the behaviour of the sea were something scientists could negotiate their way towards. Some people wrote songs about how to understand the sea. Others did calculations about it, then argued about the entire business with their colleagues. She pictured the last congress of the world's oceanographers. A conference hall full of Geir Olavs. The long discussions, the arguments for and against, before they decided that the thermodynamic equation of seawater should be changed. Did they conduct a vote in the end to decide how the properties of seawater should be expressed? Should the absolute salt content of the water be measured as a function of the water's conductivity or in grams per kilo? If it did go to the vote, grams per kilo won the majority. This method better captured the significance of the water's density for variations in the composition of seawater between different ocean areas, Tonje read. Since equations and manuals were both publicly available on the internet, she was able – after 48 hours' uninterrupted labour – to support her assignment using her own examples and accompanying mathematical deductions. She did not eat, did not drink, did not rest. She lived water, dreamt water, water enveloped her in her half-sleep, it swept her away, waking her up in new places with new insights whose scope she failed to grasp until she wrote them down and saw how they fell into a pattern. For a week, she waited for his reaction. When the marked assignments were returned, he said nothing in front of the others. The written comment on the last page was as brief as before. *We need to talk.*

'You already have a depth of understanding on the topic that most people take several years to acquire,' he said as they queued at the coffee bar waiting to be served.

He paid for her coffee. She instantly regretted not having ordered a double latte instead of a regular black coffee. Nor did she know what to say when the girl behind the counter asked whether they wanted china or paper cups. If she chose china, that would signal a presumptuous, intrusive attitude. As if she took it for granted that they would spend some time sitting together. A paper cup, on the other hand, suggested that one was busy. And she was not busy. Feigning indifference must be the most difficult thing in the world, she thought. Her head seethed. But fortunately, Geir Olav resolved the matter nicely with a casual, 'We'll drink it here.' That was one way of doing it, too.

They found a free table. Tonje's hand worked away at an invisible strand of hair beside her right ear. Now and then, she lifted her cup without drinking.

'I have never seen anything like this in a first-year student,' he started.

He asked why she had chosen meteorology. A question to which Tonje had no satisfactory answer. She had initially thought about applying for medicine – it seemed like an obvious choice, just because she could – but her year at the care home had taught her that she was happier in the company of healthy people. They smelt nicer.

‘I hope you’ll use your scientific talents,’ the school careers adviser had said. ‘That you’ll opt to do something important.’

That sounded sensible to Tonje. Yet a year later, the day before the deadline for university applications, she still had no idea what to choose. After a painstaking review of all the science courses University of Oslo had to offer, molecular biology and biochemistry seemed just as relevant as stochastic modelling and risk analysis. It was a great help, therefore, that the heavens chose to open just as Tonje came out onto the steps of the care home at the end of her shift, unleashing a hailstorm that transformed her surroundings into utter chaos in a matter of seconds. *Goodness*, she thought and her course was set. The Meteorological Institute. Bjørg was instantly enthusiastic.

‘Ooh, sweetheart! You’ll be on telly!’

It wasn’t an explanation she could offer the professor.

‘I’m concerned about the climate,’ she said instead. ‘You know. The climate issue.’
And Geir Olav nodded.

He wanted to be sure that she understood the extent of her talent. Wanted to know what she was thinking of in terms of direction and more in-depth study later on. She was not thinking about this at all. She placed herself before him like an irresistible lump of brightly coloured plasticine. *Knead me! Shape me!* He would be her mentor. Her guide. Help her make carefully considered choices.

‘I hope you’ll think about going in the direction of oceanography,’ he said.

‘I *do* like water,’ Tonje answered.

‘Listen, my door is always open for you.’

He got up. Chuckled a bit, then added: ‘As long as you close it behind you.’

Tonje was left sitting there in perplexity as she watched his back disappear. She wanted to run after him, grab hold of him, demand that he told her what he’d meant by that. The thing about the door. *Why should I shut the door?* she wanted to ask, but didn’t, because if she gave it a second’s thought, it became obvious that he wanted her to shut the door behind her on her way *out* of his office. After going in there to get advice on additional reading, she was supposed to shut the door on her way out so that he could carry on working undisturbed.

He hadn't meant it the way she was fantasising about – that he wanted her to shut the door while she was inside his office. Of course not.

And then everything stopped. Conversations, glances and smiles. Without explanation. Like the hand of a watch stopping. She continued to hand in assignments about Newton's laws of motion, estuarine circulation and the Sverdrup balance without triggering any response whatsoever. She sat in the auditorium during his lectures, trying not to think too hard about how a brilliant academic talent arranges her legs, coughs or holds her pen. He would consistently turn with an encouraging gesture towards Torgeir, who was of average cleverness – as well as being positive and engaged – but by no means brilliant. Tonje yawned pointedly, gaze fixed on Geir Olav, as Torgeir spoke – and Geir Olav equally pointedly ignored her. One time, he appeared in the reading room. This was distinctly odd, since it was on a different floor from both his office and the auditoria where lectures were held. Out of the corner of her eye, it looked as if he was heading in her direction, but then he stopped abruptly with a little nod and vanished out of the room again. She analysed the episode for days. Another time, he passed her en route from the Metro station without saying anything other than a conspicuously curt 'Hi.' But she had the impression that his shirts were somewhat more crisply ironed than before. The light blue one was even new.

'In the next lecture, we're finally going to make a start on the last topic of this course,' he said, one Tuesday late in April.

'Waves! Most people think waves are water that moves when the wind blows. That's wrong. Waves move in ellipses and the water ends up in almost exactly the same position over and over again.'

Did his gaze meet hers on purpose?

'Yet even so, the energy can be transmitted from one wave to another and in principle it can move all the way to the other end of the planet.'

There was a challenge in his smile, an insolence. Was it accidental? No, he looked at her again. Directly. Encouragingly. As if he were trying to provoke something. His smile became crooked. She sat there for a couple of minutes after he had left the auditorium before getting up resolutely, taking the lift up to the institute, strutting into Geir Olav's office, remembering to shut the door behind her and kissing him.

To see what would happen, she told herself afterwards.

What happened was sex. One time. Several times. Potential energy built up during hours in the auditorium was converted into kinetic energy on his office sofa. After an eight-week, summer-vacation-imposed separation, it had the force of a tsunami.

Tonje hadn't had the faintest idea that she harboured the capacity for this kind of behaviour and was immensely amused to find that she did. Sure, she was the sharp one – but she'd always known that. To find out that she was also rebellious, shocking, boundary-smashing was a pleasant surprise; it made her think her life might end up being a great deal more interesting than she had foreseen. She laughed at Geir Olav when he took off his glasses and put them on his desk before unbuttoning his shirt to reveal a surprisingly smooth and hairless chest above a somewhat slack belly. Interrupted him with passionate kisses when he tried to say *we shouldn't be doing this*. Pulled off his trousers as soon she sensed all his reservations starting to melt away to secure safe passage, both mental and physical, for his tumescent member. On Tonje's side, no effort was made to conceal ill-buttoned clothes or smudged mascara as she strutted down the corridor lined with doors bearing the name plaques of the scientific staff. The love bite he had deposited on her neck one Tuesday afternoon was displayed like a jewel beneath her piled up hair on the Wednesday. She adopted that straight-backed posture typical of people are well aware of their own attractiveness.

'We have to be careful,' he said.

'Are you scared or something?' she laughed.

And then came the episode that first enraged her then left her simply sulky. It would be a long time before she realised that Martha Gislevik was a gift she really didn't deserve.

'I want you to work in twos on this assignment,' Geir Olav said at one of the first autumn lectures, then split the group up into pairs using the gym teacher method that brooks no negotiation.

Tonje knew that Martha was actually a third-year student who was re-sitting this course to improve her marks. She was the daughter of a well-known meteorologist who delivered the weather forecast on national television, so it was with a certain *schadenfreude* that the other students whispered in the corridors that it seemed the apple didn't always fall so *very* close to the tree. Tonje could have sworn that Geir Olav had put them together on purpose and she made no attempt to conceal her irritation. It was not her damned job to haul mediocrities

through courses that went totally over their heads. Martha's first attempt to interpret the assignment prompted a groan that came out a bit louder than Tonje had intended.

'Look, I may not be as brilliant as you, but at least I'm not the one sleeping with my lecturer,' Martha said.

That resulted in Tonje getting up, swaggering out of the seminar room without a word and leaving Martha to write the entire assignment by herself. And that, in turn, led to Geir Olav hauling her into his office, not to rip off her clothes but to tell her to shape up and apologise to Martha.

'Otherwise I'll fail you.'

His anger was unexpected. Unexpected and utterly genuine.

'You can't do that.'

'Try me.'

So Tonje presented her apology and Martha said that she would consider accepting it in return for a beer and assistance with the compulsory assignments for the rest of the term.

'It's possible I'll also require you to go through some extra assignments with me when the exam is coming up.'

'OK,' Tonje said.

'Great,' said Martha.

And that was that. They met regularly and as they discovered, to their mutual surprise, that they genuinely enjoyed each other's company, the transactional nature of their relationship gradually abated. Martha started to take coffee along to morning lectures for both of them. Black as tar and just as strong in thermos cups with lids. On Tonje's birthday, she brought in a chocolate muffin with icing and candles, which she lit in the canteen during lunch break, prompting everyone to burst into a spontaneous rendition of *Happy Birthday*. Then Martha was off sick for a few days and Tonje discovered that she missed the way she swept into the auditorium, red-cheeked, her dishevelled hair sticking out in all directions, shouted a loud *Hello!* when she threw open the door, as if it was a matter of general interest that she, in particular, had arrived, then dropped her green coat, knitted mittens and scarf in a big pile on the bench beside Tonje. When Martha came back, Tonje hugged her long and hard.

'Great to see you're not dead or something.'

'You could have called me if you were so worried about it, you know,' Martha grinned.

'Well, I *have* written some legible notes for you. From the lectures you missed,' Tonje muttered.

‘Oh, you’re such a sweetheart!’

Martha’s tone was light-hearted, but there was something about the way she said it. Tonje wondered if she was actually touched. The possibility that she had been moved lingered in Tonje’s thoughts for a long time afterwards. She wanted to do everything she possibly could for her.

By the run-up to Christmas, both of them had passed the exam and their relationship had become so indistinguishable from a regular friendship that Martha ventured to bring up the matter of Geir Olav again. The fact that she had grown up knowing Geir Olav as an uncle figure and her dad’s old student friend gave her words a certain weight.

‘He came to the hospital when I was born,’ she said with a grimace. ‘My family celebrated Constitution Day with his family every single year of my childhood. He gave me Aristotle’s *Meteorologica* as a confirmation present. I can’t bear the thought of him sleeping with my gal pal.’

Tonje had to concede that this was a serious objection.

‘And on top of that there’s the obvious problem of him being 30 years older than us and married, and the fact that the relationship breaches all kinds of guidelines at the institute.’

Martha fixed her with a relentless gaze.

‘It isn’t a relationship,’ Tonje protested. ‘It’s just a bit of fun. I’m a big girl. I’m totally in control.’

And it was true, too. She was in control. Or at least she *had been* in control. Until Svalbard.