The Sami Problem

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Agent's note:
Marie Engmo lives in France with her partner Clement and their baby daughter Anne, having left her native Norway years earlier. When she learns that her maternal grandmother – her áhkku – has died, she travels home to Finnmark, Norway's northernmost county, for the funeral. Áhkku's death makes Marie realize that she has lost contact with her roots and she confronts what she has long suppressed: her Sami identity and the way oppression has marked the lives of her great-grandmother, her grandmother, her mother and herself, and about how her Sami background has shaped her worldview.

FOR A LONG time I was ignorant about the shared Sami past.

I thought we were a people with no history until I was sixteen.

We didn't talk much about the distant past in our house.

My mum and dad discussed fisheries policy, the municipality's land-use plan and Sami parliamentary elections, yet most of all they were passionate about public administration, they almost shouted across the dinner table even though they were usually in agreement, but were so frustrated with those who disagreed, and cultural policy and economic policy, and even

more public administration! And we listened carefully, my brothers and I, and often we would say something, and more often we repeated things we had heard them say with the same intensity at school, and we soon learned that in the Engmo household – my father's surname was so banal in Norwegian that we never really thought about it – you had to interrupt if you wanted to make yourself heard, and you had to speak loudly even if you were shy and withdrawn, and so you just had to get used to it, and when we had visitors, they knew how it was, here we talk politics or tell stories, but we don't give lectures on Sami history. I don't think my mum knew much about it either. She was more into our family history, she knew our ancestral lines and who we were related to in various places, in Nesseby, Iversfjord, Tana, Utsjok, but she never said anything about the Sami living at the time as the Vikings, and so I must have assumed that this wasn't the case. I found out at one point that some of her ancestors had come from the area around Seifjord, but then – like so many other Sami – they had moved or been forced to move to the head of the fjords and finally to central Finnmark. The problem with genealogy is how it seems to boil everything down to the fate of individuals.

A question that is never asked receives a silent answer all the same.

My answer was: we have no history. We only have stories.

But then I turned sixteen.

I had moved to Alta for my last three years of secondary school.

I was supposed to be going home to Seifjord to work at the fish processing centre for yet another summer, but then one of my relations, Ivvár-eanu or Lájla-muoŧŧa, asked if Marie would like a summer job at the museum in Márkannjárga, they were looking for people, preferably with local connections and okay English. I hadn't lived in Márkannjárga for six years, but I said yes; it was warmer in Márkannjárga than in Seifjord in the summer, swimming in the river was more bearable than in the ice cold sea, the water could get up to eighteen degrees there, rather than ten.

I took the bus.

My grandma, my áhkku, was still living at home, but she wasn't the same anymore. They said something had happened after my áddjá died, that loneliness had crept into her life without her even noticing it. They said she needed company. There had been a gradual change

of pace – active, hardworking áhkku, with one official job and at least twice as many that were unofficial, now led a more sedentary life. She had retired, gradually giving up local politics and her roles in associations. For a while she'd had a kind of boyfriend, but she had grown tired of him, and now she mostly stayed home in the evenings, and that wasn't like her at all.

She so enjoys seeing her grandchildren, said my aunts and uncles.

I arrived at her house with my huge suitcase. I sat with her in the living room each evening, sometimes we watched a TV programme together or flicked through magazines, and sometimes we just talked, and other times a woman would come round to help her curl her hair, or dye it. She didn't go to church anymore like she used to every Sunday when we were small; she would often take us with her when we were still living there, dressing us in *kofte*, our traditional Sami outfits, and holding our hands as we crossed the road to the enormous, holy building – the architects were inspired by Sami building traditions, it was said, unlike all the Norwegian churches I have seen since, yet it was still the first church I knew and therefore I thought all churches were supposed to look that way, and therefore, again, it represented the very idea of a church for me – something resembling a *gamme*, a Sami turf hut, big and full of people, and áhkku knew them all, and she was always smartly dressed, and she smelled nice, and she would stand there in a flowery summer *kofte*, looking like she never whistled or did anything wrong, and she would invite her girlfriends home with her afterwards and serve them freshly baked cakes and coffee, and was a different áhkku from the one she was when it was just us, her family, a stiffer áhkku who didn't look like she knew what it meant to laugh with her mouth open, but then sometimes somebody would say something funny and her controlled expression would completely crack and back came that sparkle in her eye. One of the girls in my class at Márkannjárga primary school once said that my áhkku was so strict and proper, and I remember asking: My áhkku? Are you sure? She nodded. Strict, I thought, is áhkku strict? Once while we were sitting there on the benches in our smart clothes, my oldest brother farted so loudly and so badly that the whole congregation turned round, and his face went all red and he stared at áhkku as if to apologise, but then the other churchgoers followed his eyes and glared at áhkku, so she went all red, found silently guilty of this bodily outburst, while the pastor just carried on chanting at the front. And afterwards, when she was about to tell my oldest brother that he shouldn't have looked at her like that, she couldn't bring herself to use that stern voice of hers, not properly, instead she started to laugh, and she laughed and

laughed until she had to fish out a hanky from her handbag, saying: Oh well, at least God knows the truth!

After she became a widow, she was no longer so split between her virtuous self and the one I always yearned for when it was hidden – the tear in her nylon tights. She was stranded somewhere in between instead.

I was with her in the evenings, but during the day I would go up the hill to the museum, enter the code, let myself in, prepare the day, put money in the till.

You'll mostly have to welcome the visitors, give them a bit of information and sell tickets, I was told. But sometimes there'll be larger groups needing a guided tour. So it's important that you know what you're talking about.

I nodded.

It was called a *Sami museum*. It could have been called a *Sami folk museum*, *Sami art museum* or a *Sami historical museum*, but the Sami couldn't afford buildings or budgets to differentiate one from the other, you had to be economical, you just had to gather everything Sami-related in one museum. There was history and art and traditional costumes, the past and the present, all mixed up and crammed into a few square metres. Most of it couldn't be displayed because there wasn't the room or money to do so, but it was still possible to teach people something.

The curator gave me a tour of the permanent collection.

The curator didn't know why I was so quiet, didn't know I was about to crack, and I was thinking so hard, I know how I look when I'm thinking, I know that I get a concentrated furrow in my forehead, and you can see my thoughts moving in my pupils – Karolina filmed me with her digital camera one time I was thoughtful like that, and sent me the video and said that I looked so sad. That's how I think I looked as I trotted obediently behind the curator, becoming more and more furious.

Here you can say something about the first written accounts of Sami existence and culture, the curator said in front of a map of Sápmi. I mean the Roman ones, she added.

I'd never heard anything about any Romans before. It had never dawned on me that the Sami had coexisted with the Romans, without there being any sea between them, just miles and miles of land. And there they were, with their helmets and conquests and war god Mars, and we were there too, in our part of the world, simultaneously. We, I thought. A Roman had written about us, and we suddenly existed more than we had ever done in me before. We weren't just a thin little dash leading nowhere but a long, thick rope of lineage. I'd been thinking as I did when I occasionally still had to introduce myself in Sami, and never said the official, quintessentially Norwegian version *Marie Engmo*, but chose a branch of my family tree and listed name after name of those who had come before me, and then myself at the end, I chose áhkku's, nearly always áhkku's. Ommot Ánne Márjjá Káre Márjá, I would say, so the line of descent was clear and obvious to everyone, but Sami history began long before, we existed in Roman times, so in fact, technically speaking, I could continue the line further and further into the past until I ended up two thousand years back in time and probably even earlier, a people has usually existed long before there's any written documentation – writing isn't the same as existing – and I would even find us there.

Why hadn't my mum ever told me this? And why hadn't áhkku? Or that know-it-all form teacher with the crooked smile we had for social studies and history? I could have won far more discussions, I seem to remember thinking, if I'd had this ammunition earlier. WHOSE FAULT WAS IT THAT I'D GOT TOP MARKS IN HISTORY WITHOUT KNOWING ABOUT MY OWN? The topic for my oral exam had been the colonisation of Africa, and I'd known more about the Belgian Congo and Idi Amin than I knew about Sápmi. The examiner was pleased, the examiner told my teacher that I seemed to know everything. BUT I DIDN'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT WHAT REALLY MATTERED.

Here's an illustration of the Sami year, with its eight seasons, said the curator. The tourists are particularly interested in this, so it's worth taking some time to explain the seasons and how the Sami depend on nature. You know what I mean. You're from here. You know all this.

She winked at me. I let out a short laugh but couldn't bring myself to nod.

The map with all the Sami languages.

This was also familiar and unfamiliar to me. I knew that there were different language varieties, that we couldn't understand Southern Sami, but I had no idea there were so many.

I stood there in front of this tsunami of knowledge about our past, and I nearly drowned in it.

A copy of the ancient drum used by a *noaidi*, a Sami shaman; the original was in Denmark at the time.

The history of the artefacts in the museum was also the absence of many of them.

A river emptied of pearls for a distant king.

Resources pumped-pumped-pumped out over hundreds of years, taxes paid without anything in return. Some of our dead bodies had even been dug up and sent south. What did we have left? Fragments.

A lot of people are also interested in the relationship between men and women, said the curator. Because they can see in the illustrations that they're doing the same things. People often ask about traditional gender roles, she said, but you can just say how it is, that before Christian influences really took hold, everyone did everything, well, apart from bear hunting, said the curator, women weren't supposed to hunt bears, that meant bad luck, but there were plenty of other things for us to hunt, ptarmigans, hares, reindeer, well I'm sure this all sounds familiar.

I spent that whole summer guiding groups of tourists around the exhibition, showing them everything, answering questions, and yet it seemed like I was saying as much to myself as to them. It was like I was showing myself around in my own roots, deeper roots than what I'd been given at birth and gained through socialising with relations, the roots you can't see without help from inherited knowledge. I guided myself into place.

That is what happened.

Whenever it was quiet at the museum, I would rummage around in the piles of books in the backroom and look through them. I couldn't stop reading. And I let it sink in. It did sink in. Someone had tricked me. They had used the word nomadic, insinuating haphazard, and then I would read about *siida* community structures, systems for exchanging services, a

collective culture, the hospitable *verdde* culture. Advanced, organised, just not the way the Scandinavian countries did things. And I got angrier. I would call my mum at night and say: DID YOU KNOW ABOUT THIS? DID YOU KNOW ABOUT THE TAX EXEMPTION FOR NORWEGIANS? THE ACTUAL COLONISATION THAT WENT ON? POPULATE THE AREA! DID YOU KNOW? And my mum would say yes and then no, she'd suspected some of it, but not all of it. Of course she knew about all the discrimination and that it went back a long way, but all the details – no, she didn't know about them. Why did we only get a stupid chapter in our social studies textbook with a few pictures of reindeer racing? Why didn't we even get a mention in our history book? I kept asking, and mum said that I had a point.

I was angry because this was all considered a parenthesis, something that didn't concern the study of Norwegian history or had anything to do with Norwegian history, the way people always complained that the devastation of Finnmark during the war wasn't adequately communicated on a national level. It was less than that, too. The war in Finnmark at least got a mention. Because a bomb in the north isn't the same as a bomb in the south. A bomb in the south might hit those who matter to the Norwegian state.

I sat there, and wandered around there, day in and day out at the museum, feeling like the victim of a robbery.

Who had robbed me?

The universities? The government? The most influential Norwegian historians?

Who should I report to the police?

I clenched my fists.

The words I used when talking to the tourists got more and more aggressive.

Who had stolen the story of my people from me?

Of course I didn't report anyone. I had lost something, though. My loss was abstract, yet it felt concrete. It was after that summer that I began to say *Norwegian* in a different way. Not all the time, but in certain situations, whenever I realised what the word Norwegian involved, I could utter it so that spit came out of the corners of my mouth, and some of my teachers took me aside and explained that there was something about my attitude that could

prevent me from succeeding later in life – the *Norwegian* way of life was what they meant. I tried to listen to them, because I wanted the freedom that good academic results were supposed to provide, but I often forgot. I would cross my arms before I put up my hand to contradict them. I forgot to be that reserved Marie, waiting outside in the hall for my relations to seek me out of their own accord. Or rather, I was her, but I didn't seek them out, I sought confrontation. *Marie, I would rather you didn't contradict me in front of the whole class.* But what if I'm right, though? A long, drawn-out sigh. *It's not always a matter of being right, Marie. The sooner you understand that, the easier it'll be for you to succeed in life.* So I shouldn't ever speak up when I disagree? *Aren't you listening at all to what we're trying to tell you?* No, yes. Okay then.

I hit the terrible twos as a teenager.

WHEN I WAS in my twenties, I had a number of short-lived love affairs, and I would repeat that worn-out cliché over and over: *out of sight, out of mind.*

For *them, the Norwegians with power and prestige, with a voice in society*, the answer to the question was to force us Sami out of sight. Unfortunately, we were resilient, and our culture was even more resilient. It had resisted for thousands of years, it refused to give way. Whenever the Scandinavian cultures picked a fight, turned up the pressure, the Sami became even stronger, robust, formed a united front against them and their hierarchies. Or we refused to give way. We didn't write much of it down, though. When I search for testimonies from Sami history, I only find the outsider's perspective. I learn what government officials venturing up north thought about us, what missionaries and adventurers observed. It's not a good lens to see your ancestors through. It's not a proud lens. It's devoid of *I* and *we*, full of *they* and *them*, and no one has bothered to mark things in red at all.

I want an *I*, I want a *we*.

I don't want Anna to read about who she is from Christian missionaries' descriptions of Lapland a few hundred years ago. Or how it was for a pastor's wife from southern Norway to live in Márkannjárga in the 1920s. Or the more modern version: pale, blinking presenters out in the field speaking directly into the camera about these strange people that they meet and what they get up to. The effect is the same. *The others* remain *the others.* And nobody much cared if it was balanced with enough stories from our side, but that's not what happens anyway. The scales are tipped in one direction, they watch us until we start doing the same as them. Stop dead at seeing our own reflection. Look at us, look how strange and exotic we are. I don't want it to come from the outside. I want her to be drawn backwards through our gaze, and áhkku is the one to have left the most traces, told the most stories. Áhkku is the *I* that is missing in the history of the Sami written by others.

Anna was born three months before áhkku died, yet something remains.

I want her to get to know what remains. I want her to have firm foundations. But we're so far away, from nature, from the culture. Maybe it's already too late. It doesn't have to be. It must be possible to … pass something on? Some part of me must be able to attach itself to her even in a foreign country? I know I didn't think things through. I did think, just not carefully enough. I chose to get away from Norway but I had to get away from Sápmi at the same time.

Have I made that choice for her, too?

Anna can't read yet, but when she can I will entice her with story after story from áhkku's life, from *her* parents' lives, I will let her get a subjective view of Sami history with us as the subject, I won't give that away, I won't let *them* make us *them*.

All these pronouns.

All these perspectives.

All I want is an identity and roots that a bigger, more powerful nation hasn't attempted to sever. To achieve this, I need a history, a chronology, we and I need to shake off the idea that the study of history itself belongs to the others.

I don't know if I can tell that story.

I also wanted to tell it before she was born, just to myself.

I couldn't do it.

I know I have notes. I know they don't lead anywhere.

I know I was looking for a villain, an antagonist, a foil for my reframing of history. The Norwegian state is no good, it's too grey and shapeless, it's too smug, wavering between an inferiority complex and a superiority complex, it's the little brother that has finally climbed to the top of the global ladder and is now standing there, handing out money and thinking that it's a victory.

The Norwegian state makes a terrible villain.

It's less windy than expected when we land. I don't even tremble.

I don't need to press my finger against my scar again, or fear anything at all.

The sky is grey. The building is tall and wide and Scandinavian.

I'm exhausted even though I'm only halfway.

It's an hour until my next flight.

The Swedish pilot thanks us for flying with them.

As soon as I turn off flight mode, my phone lights up. Clément is wondering where I've put Anna's woolly hat. My mum's first message says that a surprising number of people have contacted her wanting to come to the funeral. Her second message says that she shouldn't really be surprised. Àhkku's study is overflowing with papers from all the associations she was involved in. It's so easy to forget when you think how much she'd deteriorated by the end, it says. I think this is a group message, the kind she sends to both my brothers. I think she sends them this kind of message a lot, but has removed me from the group and now added me again. I bet she hesitated before she sent the first one, but then she thought, oh well, Marie will be here soon, I might as well keep her in the loop.

I'm itchy.

Under my feet, a place I can't reach. I stand there pondering for a while, then I answer Clément that it's on the shelf below the top one in the cupboard in the hall, and I text my mum to say that she needn't worry, we're all going to help her sort everything out. She answers almost immediately: *Dad and I are looking forward to seeing you again*.

It doesn't sound like her.

It sounds formal. Like a *With kind regards, Our deepest sympathy, Our condolences*. As though funereal language has polluted her own speech.

She must have known that's what she would answer even before I answered.

She has started to include me in her plans.

As though I was an acquaintance and not her only daughter.

I bend down and try to get hold of my worst foot, where the itch is most intense, irritating, like I've got sand in my sock. I can't grasp it, I can't grasp anything.

It's still a few hours until I arrive in Sápmi.

SÁPMI.

I like that word better than *Samiland*. *Samiland*, it's like renaming Norway *Norwegianland*, it has an almost childlike precision, it's not as intricate as language and words actually are when you don't invent them, just let them evolve and be themselves over time. Too logical. Too artificial. No, Sápmi is the word. Sápmi, Sápmi.

Lapland sounds foreign. And that slight unpleasantness still remains when they use the word *Lapp*, even in place names. What were those jokes that the boys in my class used to crack at secondary school? What do Sami girls dance at parties? The lap dance! Where do Sami kids do their homework? On their laptops! Hey, Marie, don't go. Listen to this one, Marie. You'll like this one. What does Santa say to little Sami girls? Come and sit on my lap! Ha ha, that's a good one, eh, Marie? What happened to the Sami woman after she came home from hospital? She had a relapse! Why are you looking at me like that? Where's your sense of humour, Marie? Why did the Sami athlete lose the race? He fell over on the last lap. Hey, Marie, come back!

And then I see myself from the outside while I sit by the next gate, Marie, fourteen, Marie, fifteen, shut up, I probably said to them back then, and now, in retrospect, I find myself getting annoyed by all my reactions. I should have just stared at them blankly. That's what I am trying to do. To rewrite the young Marie, make her older and more blasé, cooler. Don't worry about it! I call, now more than twice her age. I so want to react in a way that will put a stop to it. I so want, in person, to stop the ridicule as much as the hate. I so want to cure centuries of injustice.

Because that's what it's like. You take on the responsibility yourself. I have spent far too much of my life trying to find the perfect reaction to idiotic comments about the Sami. The guy that led our study group at the University of Oslo, what was it he said when we were sitting together one 6 February, the Sami National Day? He nodded at me and said: I'm glad we're done here. Now I'm going to do some laps in the pool. Everyone went quiet for a moment, then some of them grinned, and I looked at him. I mean, that's how I celebrate, he said. I love swimming. And then I managed it, not on purpose, more in pure shock, not in despair, not in anger, just in pure amazement. I wanted to ask him why he had told me that, and how he wanted me to react, but none of that came out either. It was just as well. My silence made him nervous. Look, it was a pun, he said, ruining the joke himself. I mean, I don't think of you as a

Sami, he added. I think of you as person like us. That made me want to laugh. I think I did laugh. And he looked so relieved, because he hadn't heard what he had actually said. Not a Sami, I repeated to myself, as I made a note of our next study group meeting. *Not a Sami, but a person like us.*

Áhkku was called Lapp.

Fucking Lapp, said people living further up the valley.

Fucking Lapps, they shouted at her brothers and sisters too.

In Seifjord we were called Mountain Finns, or Fucking Mountain Finns.

A Sami knife was a Mountain Finn knife.

A Sami *kofte* was a Mountain Finn *kofte*.

Sami was a Mountain Finn language, not to be confused with Finnish, which was completely different, and definitely definitely more distinguished, even though it wasn't as highly regarded as Norwegian either.

They couldn't have said, as so many people do when they are told that the words they use are hurtful, that it wasn't intentional. Because it was intentional. It was never neutral, another word did exist, but they didn't care. It was a way of dehumanising us, denying us the right to choose our own name. Call yourselves Sami as much as you want, to us you'll always be Mountain Finns.

Hate doesn't necessarily shrink people's vocabulary, doesn't make it smaller and narrower.

Hate can make people more inventive. Hate can provide a breeding ground for new linguistic images, puns, metaphors, similes. Hate can write brochures, pamphlets, books. There are special publishing houses founded on shared hatred. And these texts can again provide a breeding ground for more hate, less understanding. Similes are not just something you learn about at school, with no relevance in the real world. A simile can be the little seed you plant and later feed and water, so that it can grow into a thriving, far-reaching policy.

When I was young, it was the rhythm of the language, rhymes, the sounds of the letters that attracted me to it. I wanted to write because what I read was so beautiful, I would

continue chewing over the sentences I liked best while others sang or hummed or drew. It wasn't until later that I managed to see the destructive potential in the same material.

Could a wordless human race commit genocide?

Don't you need a dehumanising language to get enough people to join in?

That's why I am also scared of words, also scared of books.

I have never burned a book, but I have opened some, read a bit, and felt the desire to do so. I don't think that is the answer, though. When hate has grown so big that it's been written down and published and sold hundreds or thousands of copies, it won't disappear if you set one of them alight.

Marie, sixteen, at secondary school in Alta, I don't like to think of myself in the third person, but I was so young, I was so pissed off, I was so fed up. One of the boys had called a couple of the girls in the class fucking Mountain Finns, and Marie, I, opened my mouth and said: You mean fucking Sami. He looked at me in confusion. What? Fucking Sami, I repeated. That's what you meant to say.

It's not just a name.

Just like a first name isn't only a name.

It's an identity.

It's the anchor you have cast before setting off around the world.

They have found the solution now.

They say Sami, but they don't say it like they say other words, like they say farmer or Swedish, they put more force into it, and at the same time they almost ask it, in disbelief, as if they can't believe they have that word in their mouth, but anyway, when they say it, they make sure to show verbally, in their tone of voice and expression, that it isn't a neutral word. *Sami*.

Are you *Sami*?

Then you've said Lapp and Mountain Finn and used the right word all at once, and no one can reproach you for anything.

I think I hear it said like that about fifty per cent of the time.

In disbelief, often laughing.

As though I had just claimed to be an extinct animal species.

Or an object, a mere curiosity.

So people like you don't just exist in books and museums?