**THE YELLOW BOOK**

**By Zeshan Shakar**

**Publisher: Gyldendal**

**Sample translation © Kari Dickson**

**The Yellow Book**

**April 2010**

‘We’ll be in touch.’

Mani had heard that before. Five times, to be precise. Five job interviews that ended with the same sentence: “We’ll be in touch.”

But this time he felt positive. He liked the woman who said this to him. Marit Nymoen, deputy director in the Ministry of Children, Education and Training. A middle-aged woman who looked like any other Norwegian woman of the same age, shoulder-length hair, and neither far nor thin. Her face showed clear signs of aging, but everything about her radiated friendliness, unlike the two other people on the panel. There was a man, also middle-aged, dressed in a flannel shirt and chinos that were worn at the knee, a rep for one of the unions. Mani had already forgotten his name. Terje? He thought that was right. Anyway, Terje hadn’t said much, and his eyelids were so low that if he hadn’t spent most of the time drawing apparently random doodles in his notebook, Mani would have guessed that he’d nodded off. The third person was another woman, Hege Sivertsen, deputy director general and Marit Nymoen’s line manager. She was a few years older and more hardline in attitude and haircut (it reminded him of those pageboy cuts from the early Nineties): she sat poker-backed on her chair the whole time, leaning slightly forwards, scrutinising Mani. Whereas Marit Nymoen’s questions were generally open, like “tell us about yourself”, Hege’s questions were as sharp as her hair.

‘Could you tell us why you, as a business school graduate, want to work here in the ministry and with the government budget, rather than the private sector?’ She said *ministry* with a touch of veneration. And on the outside, he seemed to share this awe. He drew an audible breath, as if to warn them that he was now going to bare his soul.

‘Because I believe that value creation in the public sector is as important as value creation in the private sector. I want to make a difference. To work with something that has an impact on people’s everyday lives.’ He thought it was perhaps a bit much, but Samir had insisted he should say it if the question came up. A question he’d asked himself as well.

He really wanted a corporate job. PWC, Deloitte, DNB, Statoil, Google. Big glass buildings and suits. It was there between the lines of all his notebooks from BI, the Norwegian business school, and he had applied to all those companies, for both traineeships and regular positions, he’d known that he was aiming high, but it wasn’t impossible. Lots of his fellow students from the right side of town, the ones he’d sat with in lectures and queued with at the canteen at BI, had landed jobs like that, even Rajinder and Hamza had too, in Gjensidige and Microsoft. But even though he’d been called into interviews for some, where he thought he’d done alright, the result was always the same. No one was interested. Getting the train from Haugenstua to Oslo S had become a painful reminder, and he hung his head and looked at his hands as the train passed the buildings of Barcode, where his applications might as well have been strung up for all to see.

Marit was clearly happy with his answer. She nodded enthusiastically. Terje from the union perked up and nodded too. Hege, however, wasn’t satisfied. ‘But what is your real motivation for wanting a job?’

The obvious answer was money and prestige. He’d gone to BI primarily because he thought that learning about money was the best way to get more. He didn’t say that. Couldn’t really think of anything else to say.

‘Well, like I said, I guess, I want to do something useful for society and others.’

‘Ok ...’ Hege looked over at her phone that was lying on the table. Asked if the others had any more questions. Terje shook his head.

‘Just one last one from me,’ Marit had said brightly. ‘Mani, where do you see yourself in five years’ time?’

He smiled inside, liked the fact that she’d used his name, and that he’d prepared an answer for this question. ‘What’s important for me, is to do the best job I can, wherever I am.’

Back down at reception, he shook hands with Marit. She went over to the lift and he headed towards the barrier that separated him from the exit, pulled off the visitor’s badge that he’d stuck to the breast pocket of his shirt, and gave it to one of the receptionists, then walked out through the heavy doors of the Y-Block.

It was warm outside. The grey paving stones of the Government Quarter were bare and dry. The water feature in front of the Highrise was still empty, but the lime trees on the avenue that ran down the middle of the feature had started to bud. He looked over at the entrance to the Highrise. In case Jens Stoltenberg was there. But couldn’t see the prime minister, only a woman and a man, deep in conversation, each clutching a pile of documents as they hurried towards Akersgate. Their staff cards on lanyards bounced back and forth against their diaphragms. Mani caught a glimpse of the Norwegian coat of arms, the lion holding an axe that he’d seen on the staff cards that Marit and the others had. He wanted one. He was surprised by this sudden, clear thought. Encouraged, perhaps by Marit’s friendliness, or the security guards, barriers and staff cards, the buildings - the towering Highrise, the curving Y-Block, the solid Ministry of Finance – everything that had seemed to him to be the physical manifestation of a grey, pen-pushing job, now felt different somehow, more commanding, there was an undeniable importance that attracted him. When he turned and headed down towards Oslo S, he took with him some of Hege’s veneration for *the ministry*.

When he got to Youngstorget, he rang Samir.

‘Just been to that interview.’

‘Cool.’ A few moments’ silence. ‘You didn’t say you wanted to be boss, did you?’

‘Tsk. No.’

The question wasn’t entirely unjustified. When they’d been practising for job interviews, Mani had told Samir that he’d said he wanted to be boss at one of his first interviews. Samir had sighed.

‘What, it shows ambition, doesn’t it?’ he’d protested.

‘Forget the whole hard-nosed ‘I’m going to conquer the world’ idea, it might work in Haugenstua, but it won’t work now,’ Samir had told him.

He still didn’t understand why having ambitions to be the boss would count against him.

‘Say you’ll work hard,’ Samir advised. ‘That you want to develop yourself. Just don’t tell them your aim is to be their boss in five years’ time. It’s too much.’

Samir could sometimes be more patronising than helpful, he thought, especially now that he had a job. Like he was suddenly an expert on anything to do with working life, because he worked for the Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs, or Bufdir, as he liked to call it. It had kind of upset the balance between them, a balance that had tipped back and forth as they grew up. From equal when they were kids, long before Samir’s family moved from Haugenstua to Fjellhammer, when they still lived in the same block and the only thing that separated them was a concrete ceiling and wall-to-wall carpet. When they were in and out of each other’s rooms, when they sat in front of the TV and sang along to “Go, go Power Rangers” and later to the intro for “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.” Before they were teenagers, when the number of rungs between them on the social ladder was greater than the few stairs that separated their flats. Back then, it was generally Samir who asked if he wanted to go for a cigarette in the evening. Mani seldom prioritised it. And whenever he did, he would tell stories about what they’d been up to, him, Mehdi, Selma, Caro, Alex and Ivan, the whole “crew”, as they called themselves, who dominated the playground during the day, and the youth club and streets in the evening. They stood smoking under the light from the entrance while Mani told Samir about all the girls and parties and fights. It was a ritual, almost like a bedtime story. Samir greedily swallowed it all, wanted to hear more, could smoke three or four cigarettes in a row. It wasn’t until Mani climbed down from his place on the ladder, or rather, jumped off and knocked the whole thing over, that things levelled out between them. Then it was often him who called Samir, who had grown, not only in height, but also out of his fascination with Mani’s stories. But that was fine, because he had too. Samir was there for him, he appreciated that, and Samir was - the thought still took him by surprise - one of his few close friends.

‘I reckon people aren’t as negative about ambition as you think,’ he’d said to Samir, angry that he’d patronised him, not getting the logic.

Samir had shrugged. ‘Like it or not, we have to tread carefully, ok? Employers want you to be like them. No point in making it obvious that you’re different, they can see that already.’

He walked into Oslo S.

‘Did you talk about pay?’ Samir asked.

‘No.’ He stopped abruptly in the throng of people looking up at the departures and arrivals boards. ‘Shit, is that a bad sign? Shouldn’t they have asked if they thought I was suitable?’

‘Not necessarily. Seem to remember I wasn’t asked until I got the job.’

‘OK.’ He looked up at the board. The train was a few minutes delayed.

‘What kind of payscale are you thinking?’

‘Dunno. I’ve got a Masters. Good grades. Half a million?’

Sami laughed at the other end.

‘What?’

‘You won’t get 500, Mani. But I do hope you get the job, seriously. The ministry’s a good workplace. It’s a good move.’

‘Yeah,’ Mani said, before adding, nonchalantly, ‘I’m sure it’s good, let’s see, take it as it comes.’

He put his knife and fork down on the plate. Had still not eaten any of the food on his plate. ‘Actually, it was a pretty cool place. A bit like a film. You know, security guards everywhere, people in suits.’ He leant back against the hard chair in Café Istanbul. ‘And Jens Stoltenberg works there.’

‘Did you see him?’ Meena asked, as she stirred the ice cubes in her glass of Fanta round with the straw.

‘No, but his office is on the top floor of the Highrise.’

‘Which highrise?’

‘The one in the Government Quarter.’

Meena gave it some thought, but still didn’t know which one he meant. He described where it was and what it looked like.

‘Think I know the one,’ she said, but it didn’t sound like it. There wasn’t much he could say, he’d lived in Oslo all his life himself, but had barely never set foot in the Government Quarter before.

He picked up the knife and fork again. Stabbed a piece of meat from his Iskender kebab. Meena had ordered a mixed grill with bulgar wheat: steak kebab, chicken kebab, shish kebab, onion and cucumber, salad, yoghurt dressing and pita. It’s what she nearly always ordered, but she never ate more than half, max, and left the rest for Mani, who was already full from his own food, and needed at least half an hour, and a couple of sweet Turkish apple teas before he could stand up again. And yet they did the same thing every time they were here, a hangover from the days when eating out at their own expense, not just a kebab or big mac, but a full meal, when the waiter took down your order and served the food at your table, was as new to them as they were to each other. They’d been coming to Café Istanbul regularly ever since. Because the food was good. And relatively cheap. And because practically no one they knew had discovered the place, so they could sit there without being disturbed, without any curious looks. But most of all, they went there because it gave them the feeling of having been out, of having done something more than just drive around in his dad’s Opel.

It didn’t feel extravagant any more, he thought. Small space – how big was it really, maybe fifty square metres? Tacky tiles and flower mosaics. The patrons were workers and local teenagers, families with three or four children squeezed in around a table, all of them thirteen to the dozen.

Neither of them said anything. Let the cafe do the talking instead. The waiter who shouted something to the kitchen in Turkish. The sound of sizzling meat. The schreech of chair legs on the tiles when they were pushed back.

‘When I get this job, we’ll go somewhere really nice for a meal,’ he said. This over-confidence was nothing new to them. Ever since he’d finished his Masters and started applying for jobs, they’d played the same game with unflagging optimism. Of course he’d get a job. Then it was more like okay, maybe not this one, but definitely the next. As time passed, his optimism certainly had waned, but he didn’t say anything, and nor did she, instead they bluffed, each more assured than the other. “The job was no good anyway,” she might say. “I know, I didn’t even really try at the interview,” he would answer. “Go for another one instead.”

‘Where shall we go?’ she asked, her head cocked ever so slightly to one side, her lips in a faint smile – the anticipation and excitement had already lit up her eyes, as it does with most people. But he thought that her eyes were even more luminous. The tilt of her head made her straight, black hair fall down across her face. She pushed it away impatiently. He loved keeping her like this, holding her future and happiness, if only for a moment.

He thought about it. Couldn’t think of anywhere except Theatercaféen. The only thing he knew about it really was that there was always a golden glow inside whenever he walked past the windows, and Jon Fredriksen, the billionaire, liked to eat there.

‘Theatercaféen?’

Meena clapped her hands in delight. ‘Fancy, schmancy!’

He drove her home. They navigated their way through labyrinth of detached houses and narrow roads of Høybråten. Meena’s house was big and white, her father had bought a few years back, with the money he’d got from a small flat in Smedstua and an old pub in Grünerløkka that he’d bought for next to nothing in the Nineties, then run for a decade, and then sold at a huge profit in the early Noughties when the area became popular again. Meena was the only child still at home with her parents. Her brothers, who were both older, had moved out and started their own families. The eldest, a civil engineer, had studied at the University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, and then got a job with Siemans’ offshore division and stayed there. The other one lived in Lørenskog, but he and his family seemed to spend as much time in Høybråten as they did there, and Mani often heard the three kids in the background when he was talking to Meena. The brother was a sole trader, like his father, and ran two Narvesen kiosks in Lambertseter and Manglerud. Meena herself was studying for a Masters degree in pharmacy at the University of Oslo. She’d never really had a choice, though possibly had chosen the subject – she’d also considered medicine – but he’d never even heard her even contemplate doing anything else. Her parents pushed her, he knew that, but it wasn’t always easy to know who wanted what. Sometimes she gave everything to her studies, often did more than was needed, and was super-focused whenever she had a deadline or an exam. But she also complained about all the studying she had to do, about how tiring it was, and whenever she had the chance, she didn’t hesitate to put down her books**,** and give the other side of her personality some room – she could be a little lazy at times, lounging around all day watching TV and eating crisps, and adventurous at others, impatient to go out, to do something, with him or her friends.

He didn’t drive right up to the house, but stopped by the edge of the road, behind a huge spruce tree that stood like an obelisk in amongst the houses and blocked the view from the living room where Meena’s parents sat and watched TV. A perfect blind spot to drop Meena off, or just stay sitting in the car. He turned off the lights, felt his mobile phone vibrate in his pocket but didn’t get it out, felt better than he had done for a while, and said several times “think it’ll be good, this job.” She thought the same. They leaned in towards each other, kissed across the gear stick, for a long time. Made him think of the first time, in the same place, in the same car. It had been different from other first kisses, less fumbling, longer. But then it had also taken longer to get there. They’d already been on five dates. She didn’t want to get into the car the first few times, said later that she hadn’t been sure of who he was. So they walked a lot instead, between Høybråten and Haugenstua, through the small streets that criss-crossed the main roads. And chatted online, their MSN history would run to hundreds of pages if it were printed out. Sympathy for the other if they had a lecture first thing. A discussion about whether the ends of shoe laces on trainers should hang loose or be tucked into the shoe. What numerology had to say about their birthdays; it turned out they were a good match and they both immediately said how stupid it was, embarrassed and glad at the same time.

A long time ago now. He slipped his hand under her sweater. She whimpered when it touched her warm back, he held it there until it was the same temperature as her, but then she sighed, and slowly but reluctantly pushed his hand away.

‘Not here,’ she said, and kissed him again.

He let himself in to the building, checked the post box, but the only thing there was the housing association magazine. Pressed the button to call the lift, saw that it was on the sixth floor, and still being light-headed, couldn’t be bothered to wait, so bounded up the stairs, with their grey walls covered in pebble-dash like the outside, broken up on every floor by the beige linoleum and yellow strip-lighting that following him in through the door to the dark flat.

‘Where were you?’

His father came out of the bathroom with a razor in his hand, his face covered in shaving cream, even though it was nearly ten o’clock.

‘With Samir.’

‘Why didn’t you call?’

‘I was driving and didn’t have my hands-free, so it was dangerous.’

His father grunted and went back to the bathroom, but stopped by the door.

‘Remember Mani, you must answer when I call.’ He closed the bathroom door.

“Remember Mani” – as if he could forget. Forget that he lived with someone who’d suddenly lost his wife. Who lived in fear of losing anything else, even the smallest thing, like the flowers in the window or air pressure in the car tyres. Forget that he lived with someone who’d once been a taxi driver, but stopped driving ten years before retirement, because he hadn’t paid enough attention for a moment, a single moment in an entire career behind the wheel, he hadn’t checked properly in the rear-view mirror and reversed into a little boy on his way to school. The boy was knocked over, broke two ribs, but survived. He had to go to court, was reprimanded and had his licence suspended for a few months, but when he got it back, it was too late, he’d given up for good. Never went back to work. In every mirror he saw a little boy. He scarcely drove at all, and when Mani passed his driving test, he stopped. If Mani couldn’t drive him or public transport was too complicated, his father took a taxi. ‘I’m supporting an important business,’ he would say in his defence. But mostly, he walked, constantly looking over his shoulder, ahead, to the side, more like a war veteran who’d lost too many comrades in an ambush than an old man walking to the local supermarket.

On the way home from school, he’d often meet his dad, who just happened to be going for a walk there and then. He might pop up at the football pitch when he was playing to see if he was there, then turn and go home again. When Mani got his first mobile phone when he was fifteen, it was soon full of missed calls and text messages from his dad. He was embarrassed, none of the others sat texting their fathers all evening. So he saved his dad’s number under different girls’ names, which he changed regularly. Lene. Saima. Camilla. When his phone rang, he showed the screen to the others and said: ‘Sorry, just have to talk to this babe. She’s really stressing me out,’ then moved away from them before he answered. He just wanted to get drunk and smoke weed without worrying that his phone might ring, and he knew there was no point in ignoring it. It would only ring again minutes later. At some point he’d have to answer, and he always did in the end. No matter how drunk or out of it he was, he mustered his wits and energy enough to utter one sentence: “I’m with Samir.” If he was out on the town: “With Samir, listening to music”. And his dad was fine with that. He never wanted long explanations. He wasn’t interested. Wasn’t interested in catching him out. Didn’t want to give him a row. Just wanted him to answer. To know he was still there.

He went to his room, which was full of teenage dreams and adult responsibilities. His economics books on a small shelf, books he couldn’t bring himself to sell, that he intended to display on better shelves in a bigger room, in a bigger house, a Masters’ certificate was not enough, it had to be there in the bookcase as well, every single page had to be there. There were some bills lying on a small table, for his mobile phone contract with Telenor, for a DNB Mastercard, which he’d used for the first time when he went to Drammen with Meena to celebrate his Masters’ degree; they’d booked into a hotel from Friday to Saturday, barely left the room other than to go to a restaurant in the centre and short walk along the river; it was the first time they’d been away together, far from all the others.

He hadn’t worried about using the Mastercard. The plan was to pay it off with his first paycheck, or in the worst case, his first two paychecks. But they still hadn’t materialised and his student loan had stopped ages ago, in fact they were asking for repayments now and he’d had to apply for a six-month extension. He had no income. Luckily, his dad paid all the household bills, and he continued to use the Mastercard when he went out with Meena, for petrol, and a couple of new, slightly too expensive shirts for his interviews. He’d justified this to himself as a necessary investment, but now regretted that he hadn’t gone for something cheaper. He’d almost reached the credit limit on his card. Didn’t want to think about what he’d do then.

He sat on the bed under a big, lighter square on the wall left by a poster that Mehdi had once given him for his birthday, which he’d torn down. A still of Snoop Dog and Dr Dre from the video for “Nuthin’ but a G-thang”. It was hard to look at the patch without remembering how Mehdi used to dance to the track. Hands above his head, palms slowly moving up and down as though stroking something, body swaying from side to side, his feet firmly planted on the ground. His dance style was nothing like him. He practically never stood still, seldom held back. Selma once said that she thought he actually had ADHD. He broke boundaries wherever he went. When they were at Frogner Lido, and everyone else was jumping straight down from the ten-metre board, he bombed it. Had red skin for a week. And on the first day of eighth grade, he sauntered down the corridors where the ninth and tenth grade hung out, even though they’d been warned specifically not to go there by any older brothers and sisters unless they wanted a dunking in the urinals. But Mehdi just yelled: “Straight ahead, that’s my way. And my way ain’t the shy way.” And he didn’t end up in the urinals, no one else did either. Mehdi challenged the authority of the teachers as well as the seniors, and was constantly being sent to the principal’s office. He just grinned whenever a grim looking teacher grabbed his arm and hauled him out, said he felt more like a freedom fighter. It was the energy, the fearlessness, the loyalty he showed when you were one of the crew, that was the attraction, because he’s wasn’t a looker, the opposite in fact, and he wasn’t good at sport, hard, but not particularly big and strong physically, and yet people flocked round him. No doubt they felt that when they were with him, anything was possible for them too.

That was certainly how it felt. But he didn’t think like that about Mehdi anymore. When he thought about him now, there was no energy. Just a foot on the brake. Just weakness. Tried to think about him as little as possible, it was better that way, because when he did, he sometimes missed him, and then there was the inevitable thought that he could perhaps have done something different, and he hated it when the felt like that. Uncertain. Overthinking everything. How could he have helped someone who didn’t want to help himself? Who’d ever helped him?

He should have painted the wall a long time ago. The newspaper clipping that he’d

stuck up there wasn’t big enough to cover it all. It was from the sports’ page, and the headline was: “Petter showed them his back!” Even though he hadn’t been on skis since primary school, like everyone else, he couldn’t fail to notice Petter Northug, and when Petter had looked beat, helpless, undone in the 50-kilometre race at the Vancouver Winter Olympics, but then leapt forward with enormous energy, a kind of rope-a-dope on skis, and powered past the competition, Mani had jumped up and down in front of the TV. Around the same time, he’d come across a newspaper article where Northug talked about his late grandfather, and he’d always said to Petter: “Show them your back, my boy”. The words had resonated with him, and when he read the article, about the grandfather who didn’t live to see his grandson’s success, the tears had welled up, and he thought about those beautiful, almost fateful words, and about his own mother, who, as far as he knew, had never said anything like that, but she could have, he thought, she could.

He reached over the bills and picked up his laptop, opened it and logged onto Facebook. Samir had shared a link to a report from the ministry about child poverty, and written “this is important”. Mani pressed like and scrolled on. Came to a photograph that Ivan had posted; from the waist down he was a rough bricklayer, in work trousers with padded knees, but from the waist up, he was like a fitness model, his top so tight that it looked like it was painted on, his beard shaved precisely to emphasise his jawline, hair glistening in the sun. There was a little girl in the picture with him. Mani had never seen her before. She couldn’t be more than two. They were in some kind of park, the grass was still a bit yellow after winter, and the little girl was on his shoulders. He had his arms up to support her, which made his biceps bulge all the more under fabric of his top. He smiled when he remembered Ivan sneaking into the gym at Stovner at fourteen, using an older relative’s membership card. And at the thought that Ivan was probably ever so slightly annoyed that the girl had stuck her hand right in the middle of his perfectly groomed hair.

He pressed like again. That was basically the extent of it with the old crew. He liked their posts. Wrote happy birthday.

He continued to scroll until a message appeared in the chat window. It was Selma. The only one of the crew he still spoke to regularly. Had always been like that, really, Selma, Mehdi and him, they were all in the A class, a mini crew within the bigger crew. Selma had moved away from Haugenstua, but not far, she was still in the same part of town. Rented a small flat in one of the blocks behind Stovner Centre.

Selma: ’sup?

Mani: Not much.

Selma: boring

Mani: Had a job interview today.

Selma: hahaha

Mani: ??

Selma: you and your job interviews man

Mani: What about it?

Selma: how many you had now?

Mani: Why?

Selma: think there’s something wrong with you Mani. no one likes you. haha.

That was Selma, just like she’d always been in the playground at Haugenstua. Like when she went over to Djengiz, skinnier than skinny Djengiz, who she didn’t really know. He was totally on his guard as she approached. Knew she was Mehdi’s girlfriend, one wrong word and he’d get beaten up. Not that she’d blab to Medhi. Selma had a sharp enough tongue to look after herself. But he’d still get a beating. Selma went over and grabbed him by the wrist, looked him deep in the eye. He blushed. She put his hand on the fence next to him and said: “Hold on”. She looked genuinely concerned. “It’s that windy today you might blow away.” Then she burst out laughing and everyone around her did the same.

But she was seldom just mean. When the laughter had died down, she messed up his hair: “Just joking, you know I’m into you.” Djengiz was left transfixed, like so many others before and after, with a sheepish grin on his face.

Mani: Why are you talking to me then?

Selma: cos I’m bored

Selma: and you never hang out

Selma: just want to stay home and read

Mani: That’s called exams and a Masters degree.

Selma: wow. masters. you’re so cool, man. so where’s your job then?

He left the cursor flashing. What did she, a hairdresser, know about a Masters anyway.

Selma: you know why you don’t get the jobs? because people look after themselves. people like them

Selma: that’s the truth

He didn’t know if that was the truth. He had, recently in particular, had similar thoughts, but didn’t want to give them space, saw it as an excuse, for losers who didn’t want to make something of themselves, not him.

A hollow, mechanical ringtone interrupted his thoughts. A Skype window appeared on the screen. Meena. Incoming call.

Mani: Have to go. Chat later.

He closed Facebook, grabbed his headset and microphone from the bookshelf, plugged it in and pressed the green telephone icon on the screen.

A fuzzy, then clearer picture of Meena filled the screen. She was in her room. It was big and bright, about double the size of his. He’d never been in her house, but knew what it looked like, and not just Meena’s room. They even had a pantry, with an enormous freezer, 20-kilo sacks of rice, 5-litre cans of oil, 6-packs of Coke and shelves of dry food from lentils to pasta to Corn Flakes. She’d shown him pictures from the house when they were getting to know each other, when she showed him everything. He’d never shown her any photos of the flat. He might have done if she still lived in the flat in Smedstua, and not in a big house in Høybråten. He hadn’t told her as much as she wanted, even when she pushed him. Not how many girls he’d slept with, nor many other details of his life until then. He wanted to be close to her too, but talking about old stuff just hadn’t seemed relevant. Who they were now was more important, and who they were going to be even more so.

Loud music was playing in the background.

“Look”, she said.

She danced around the room in leggings and a long t-shirt. She’d obviously been practising. She stopped a couple of times, looked at something, then carried on. Two steps to the side, arms up on a diagonal, pulse, two steps back, same movement on the other side.

‘You like it?’ she asked, out of breath. The microphone crackled.

He clapped.

‘It’s for Sonya’s wedding.”

Sonya was one of Meena’s best friends and had just come back from Gjøvik where she’d done her final placement for dentistry. Her family lived a stone’s throw away from Meena in Høybråten. She was the first of her group of friends to get married.

‘So, we were supposed to be doing another dance,’ Meena continued, ‘but then everybody wanted to dance, and it didn’t really work with so many people, so we made it into two dances, but then they were a bit short, so now we’re doing a new dance and we’ve got like no time to practise and blah ... Hope Sonya likes it.’

‘I’m sure it’ll be fine,’ he said, thinking that most of them, the boys at least, would be more interested in the dancers than the dance, so there wasn’t much she needed to worry about.

‘Let’s have a peek,’ he said and pulled the neck of his t-shirt down.

‘Seriously, I’m trying show you a dance routine and all you want to see is this?’ she pointed at her boobs.

‘Go on ...’

She glanced at the closed door behind her. Then she pulled her t-shirt over her head.

‘Satisfied?’

‘Very. Been a long time.’

‘You know I don’t like the car ...’

He sighed. ‘I know.’

He was sitting up in bed. His mobile phone was on the floor. The back cover had come off and was too far away to reach. The screen was probably smashed, he couldn’t see as it was face down. He was breathing fast and hard. Some neighbourhood kids were kicking a ball around outside. They were laughing. Shouted and cheered when the game was over and the losers lined up, bent over with their backsides to the winner, who positioned the ball a couple of metres away, aimed, ran, kicked. He missed. The ball thudded against the end wall of the building. More shouting and cheering. He opened the window, stuck his head.

‘Hey! Shut the fuck up or I’ll come down and puncture that fucking ball, okay?’

The kids looked at each other abjectly and skulked off round the corner.

‘Fuck off,’ he muttered to himself. Sat back down on the bed with his back to the wall, was interrupted by new noises. Someone was chopping something fast and hard on a board. He opened the door, went into the kitchen, saw his dad put down the knife, and put a whole pile of chopped okra in the frying pan. The oil hissed. The old ventilator hummed, but the fat and steam from the frying pan paid no attention and clung to the equally old orange cupboards instead.

‘Mani, remember, if you make okra, always fry them first, or they’ll go slimy.’

‘Mhm.’ He went back to his room. Picked up his phone and the back cover. There was a small crack on the screen, but not as bad as he’d feared. Meena had sent him a message. Asking if they should do something later. Something to eat, maybe? Smiley face. He didn’t answer.

Why ring someone to tell them they *haven’t* got the job? Let the expectations build when he saw the number appear on the screen. Torture him with small talk, only to tell him sorry, someone else has got the job. You were our second choice. He would rather get a message that said “you didn’t get the job”, so he didn’t have time to think. That would have been a more humane way to do it, not a phonecall from Marit, who wouldn’t hang up, who kept on apologising, saying all the right things, that he’d made a really good impression, that he’d been one of the best candidates, that she, without saying it straight out, had wanted to select him. “Just give me the damn job or shut the fuck up,” he’d wanted to say, but she didn’t stop, just kept on and on apologising in a kind of maternal voice, saying he didn’t need to worry, a talented young man like himself would no doubt land himself a good job soon, she certainly hoped so, and that was when he’d interrupted and said that he unfortunately had to go now and thanked her for getting in touch, and then threw the phone on the floor. He didn’t need her to be his mum. He needed a job.

The phone rang again. Meena. He hesitated, then answered.

‘Why didn’t you answer my message?’ she asked.

‘Was busy.’

‘So, are we going out?’

‘Don’t feel like it.

‘Okay ...’

‘Didn’t get the job. They just called.’

‘Shit,’ she said, and sounded weary.

‘Oh well, next time,’ she said.

He felt he had to say more. Launched into a furious defence. None of the interviewers understood him, maybe they were racists, who knows, and public sector, what kind of fucking place was that anyway, shit pay, for people with no ambition, people like Samir.

Which was a bit unfair, really. Samir had worked hard at school, done a Masters and got a job. And yet he often thought of him as unambitious, especially when it came to career, money and girls. He was happy going to work, living in a studio flat in his parents’ house, not that bothered about getting a girlfriend. As far as Mani knew, he spent most of his free time playing Selda, watching films and reading books. ‘It suits me,’ was all Samir said. ‘Just taking one thing at a time.’ To be fair, he did tend to underplay things. At school he often said “dunno, was okay I suppose,” after a test, and then got at least a six. But grades didn’t seem to bother him, he never boasted about it. Barely mentioned them, unless he was forced, and then he played it down. “Got six, which is alright”. He seemed to be just as happy for things to chug along as to be at the top, and it was this tortoise-like pace, steady, never too fast, that Mani couldn’t get his head around, but Samir seemed to be content. It was everything that Mani and Meena would never settle for, and when they laughed at him, it was as much about bonding, about weaving together their ambitions and prospects, it tied them together like a knot.

But neither of them laughed about Samir now.

‘Come on,’ Meena said. ‘Let’s go for a drive, or something.’

He drove with no real idea of where he was going, from Høybråten out towards Lørenskog station, then back to Østre Akervei before turning towards Stovner, past the centre up Trondheimsveien and on to Grorud. Then Meena asked if they should go to Steinbruvannet, they could go for a walk there. He didn’t want to go for a walk. Didn’t want to do anything. Parked the car in the car park by the dam, which in the twilight looked like a castle in the middle of the forest. They followed the grey, squelching path through the trees. They didn’t meet many other people, only a couple of dog owners walking in the opposite direction. Mani kept his hands in his pockets and said nothing for the entire walk, other than to swear when he accidently trod in a pile of snow and felt the moisture seep into his trainers. Meena stopped. Walked back to him. Gave him a hug.

‘Love you anyway,’ she said. He stood there, wishing she hadn’t said “anyway”. It made him feel like a loser. ‘You’ll get the next job, guaranteed.’

‘Yeah,’ he mumbled.

When they got back into the car, Meena’s phone rang. Her mother.

‘Yeah, won’t be long. Just going to finish watching a film. *Avatar*. Mmm, yeah. Okay, have to go now, it’s all happening, the helicopter’s in trouble.’

He knew she hadn’t seen the film. She’d read up on it beforehand or called a friend who’d seen it. He barely registered the white lies – part of their relationship from the start. They were mundane, almost automatic. There were some things you just didn’t mention at home, like you’d got a boyfriend, otherwise it wasn’t as if Meena had to stay at home twenty-four-seven, not at all, but her life was still restricted, like a piece elastic that could never bet stretched to the full, and the few times that she did stretch it, like getting home late or staying over with someone, the monosyllabic excuses he offered his father would never have been enough, she needed a proper explanation. As she once said herself, she respected them too much not to.

His despondency trailed into the car with him and he sank even deeper in the heat from the air con. Meena said “next time” again and put her hand on his – it was still cold from outside. He didn’t want to talk about jobs and careers, didn’t want to talk about anything. She tried. Told him about Sonya and Vicky’s wedding. The food. The dance routine had gone well, even though the music stopped halfway through. ‘We didn’t know what was going on, so we just pretended it was part of the choreography and it was all a bit sad.’

He nodded, but didn’t really take it in.

‘Norwegians are so different sometimes, don’t you think?’ she said.

‘Mhm,’ he said. Even that felt like an effort.

‘There were some Norwegians at our table who Sonya went to uni with, and they were like “yeah, Sonya, you can say goodbye to freedom now”, and I thought like, ehm, right, but the way Sonya’s parents are, it’s more like hello freedom.’

‘Mhm’ was Mani’s response again.

‘Sonya and Vicky are going to move into their own flat in Bislett,’ she said. ‘It’ll be so much better for them.’ She sighed. ‘Sonya sent me photos. Do you want to see?’

He shrugged.

She turned on the radio. Switched between stations. A country song, two seconds. Adverts, two seconds. News, two seconds. Mani rolled his eyes. Turned down the volume. She went back to her phone. Scrolled through her pictures. Smiled. Laughed. Sighed.

‘Look,’ she said, and held up her phone. ‘Do you remember *Charlie Bit My Finger”?*’

He remembered it. Didn’t think it was as funny as she did, she’d even laughed when she watched it for the tenth time, said it reminded her of her nephew.

“Look, Maya sent me this, someone else has done the same kind of thing.’ He didn’t really watch. She laughed, but not as much as with Charlie. He liked it when she laughed, it was genuine, contagious. Had always like the fact that she was so cheerful, she could get angry, just like everyone else, especially when she was stressed, but basically, she was chilled and positive.

Wasn’t easy to appreciate that right now though. Thought the volume on the video was unnecessarily loud.

‘Don’t be such misery-guts, Mani, it’ll work out.’ She hit the perfect balance, affectionate enough for him not to be pissed off that she was dismissing it like that. He grunted.

She went back to the wedding, scrolled through the photographs on her phone. Smiled. Commented on some of them. Sighed.

‘Mani. If we get married ...’ she said, nonchalantly, and left it hanging there.

Typical her. Typical them. Marriage was always mentioned in theory, with words like if, maybe, even though neither of them actually doubted it. The false uncertainty was kind flirtation, at least that’s how he saw it, a desire for confirmation from the other. His plan was to marry her, and she certainly didn’t give the impression she had other intentions, quite the opposite in fact. It was a natural next step, as soon as she’d finished her Masters.

‘If we get married ...’ she said again. ‘Where would we live?’

He shrugged again.

‘I think a flat ...’

‘What about my dad?’ he almost shouted. He’d been quiet for so long that when he opened his mouth to speak now, it was as if he coughed up the words and spat them out.

‘What ...?’ She started, took a few seconds to compose herself. ‘What about him?’

Mani coughed. ‘I mean, if we get married, wouldn’t my dad live with us?’

He looked at her, for the first time in a while. Now it was her turn to look away.

‘You want us to stay in Haugenstua with your dad?’ Her tone was flat, but the emphasis on place and person were audible.

If he was honest, he didn’t know. He’d thought about it so many times, and failed to come up with a clear answer. It was hard to imagine his father all alone, and quite apart from that, there were all the practicalities, the phone calls and messages, which no doubt would be excessive. But equally, it was hard to accept that him and Meena would stay on in Haugenstua, in the old flat, in his childhood bedroom.

He wasn’t in the mood to make any decisions or even to humour her. ‘Where would he live then?’ he asked, and felt his indignation mount with every word.

She hesitated. ‘Alone?’

His face tightened into a frown. He was exasperated, with himself more than anything. In a way, he’d created the problem himself. He’d always underplayed his father’s anxiety for her. Reluctant to admit his dad’s real vulnerability, scared to bare himself. Of course she knew about all the phone calls; he’d stopped saving his dad’s number under different girls names, wouldn’t really work with Meena, so instead he usually just said “well, you know, only child and all that.” She seemed to understand that.

‘You know ...’ he paused, ‘well, he’s a very anxious person. Can’t cope with being on his own too much.’

‘Okay, but ...,’ she said.

‘Don’t want talk about it,’ he snapped.

He put the car into gear and accelerated out of the car park. Rolled down the hills to Grorud metro station. He glanced at her. The street lights flickered over her face. Her eyelashes that curled up. Her slightly crooked nose, which she bewailed when she was feeling insecure. She was looking straight ahead. Suddenly the silence was oppressive. He felt hot. He opened the window on the driver’s side. Heard the engine of the old Opel cough and splutter, the whoosh of the cars going the opposite direction.

‘Can you shut the window, it’s cold,’ she said.

The car carried on downhill, through the long bends from Grorud metro station to Grorud train station.

‘If we get married ...’ she said, when they reached the bottom, ‘you think we should still live with your dad?’

‘Can we talk about this another time?’ he said. He accelerated more than necessary. The car sailed past the 79 bus just ahead of a roundabout, the bus honked its horn, the car swerved, she grabbed the door handle, but said nothing.

‘It was about to cut me up,’ he said. Turned into Østre Akervei and put his foot to the floor, could feel the speed calming his nerves. Slowed down a little as they approached Høybråten, and pulled into the blind spot behind the big spruce tree, where no one could see them, but nothing happened between them that evening either. They kissed quickly and mumbled a goodbye.

Back home, he logged onto Facebook and click on his profile photo. It was taken on the trip to Drammen with Mina, just by the Union Scene arts centre. He was standing in front of a huge glass ball that was bigger than him, and he was reflected in the ball, grinning, in a polo shirt and Ray-Bans, and if you looked carefully at the reflection, zoomed right in, you could see an almost unrecognisable Mina. They both loved this subtle detail.

He clicked on Messenger.

Mani: What’s up?

She immediately started to write.

Selma: cut myself on my pinkie when a client sneezed. Got a massive bandage now

Selma: and the worst thing

Selma: she didn’t even cover her mouth!!!

Selma: hate my job now

Mani: At least you’ve got a job ...

Selma: what did I say Mani. they didn’t give you the job?

Mani: No.

Mani: Don’t laugh. It’s not funny.

Selma: I’m not laughing

Selma: honest

Selma: hahahahaha

He didn’t reply.

Selma: don’t go in a huff now

Selma: not your fault

Selma: you know the kind of foreigners they want, those fancy girls

Selma: they come into my work all the time

Selma: with their bags

Selma: chat about going here and there shopping

Selma: get jobs straightaway cos they’re so nice and cute and clever

Selma: bleeergh

Selma: made-up robots!

He still didn’t replay. He knew the kind of girl she was talking about, but didn’t really understand her issue with them. Was it better to let yourself go and stagnate?

Selma: you don’t wear enough make-up Mani

Selma: haha

Selma: I’ll give you a makeover, if you like. cut your hair

Mani: For free?

Selma: no ☹ the boss is a prick. Can’t give anyone a discount

Selma: a haircut’s 559 kroner for a man

Selma: but I’d be doing it

Selma: and that’s priceless

Mani: We’ll see.

That was more money than he had, and anyway, he had a hairdresser in Tøyen, who only charge 200 kroner, cash in hand, no card machine there.

Selma: but if you need shoes

Selma: go to Caro’s shop in Linderud

Selma: she gets a proper discount

Mani: Will think about it.

But he had something else on his mind.

Mani: By the way,

Mani: Would you think it was weird if my dad still lived with me if I got married?

Selma: !!!!!

Selma: mani

Selma: are you getting married????

Mani: Not what I said. Just asking.

Selma: what’s the lady said?

Selma always talked about Meena as “the lady” or just “she”, never by name, if she mentioned her at all. There was no disagreement or agreement between them. Selma knew Meena’s name from the parallel class in high school, might vaguely remember her face, but probably not. Meena had been more or less invisible at high school, kept to her own group of friends, all pretty anonymous, or that’s what he thought of them back then. They disappeared as soon as the bell went at the end of the day, never hung around after school, never went to Haugenstua youth club, not to be seen again until school the next day. She’d changed a lot since then, Meena – Selma would have had problems recognising her. He wasn’t sure that he’d have remembered her face, when he met her a few years later, if they hadn’t taken French together in ninth grade and on one occasion ended up working together in pairs. Meena often reminded him of it later, that it was the first time they spoke, but he didn’t remember it as well she did. She remembered that they’d had to parse the sentences in an article about a cycle race from a French newspaper, and he hadn’t contributed much.

He never really talked about Meena with Selma. The gap was wide, their paths too different. The two parts didn’t fit, like a painting from two different epochs, but he didn’t really feel the need to unite them either.

Mani: Just answer the question.

Selma: I think

The cursor stood there flashing for a long time.

Selma: your dad’s on his own. a woman who wants to marry you has to respect that

Selma: he’s lost people already

Selma: he knows what it means

Selma: you know that

Selma: i know that

Selma: the lady doesn’t know that

Selma: I would have moved in with Mehdi in the same situation

Mani: Sorry, have to be up early tomorrow. Away to bed. Speak soon.

Mani: Thanks.

He couldn’t face talking about Mehdi. Knew that if they started, it would take forever. She would carry on for hours. He would hear all about their wedding plans, which they had talked about as fact not theory, unlike him and Meena. Or had they? He couldn’t remember Mehdi talking about it much. It was probably easier to commit to someone when they were dead anyway.

**February 1991**

*There was no one else there anymore. No family friends, distant relatives or neighbours, who’d filled the waiting room at the hospital for weeks, then taken over every nook and cranny of the flat at Haugenstua with their voices and tears. The living room was silent. Mani’s dad stood there with his arms full of videos. Disney films he’d grabbed at the video shop in Stovner. There must have been at least ten of them.*

*‘Choose whichever one you want,’ he said to Mani.*

*Mani didn’t want to choose anything, didn’t want to watch a film, didn’t want to do anything other than sit there without saying anything, without smiling, without crying.*

*‘Just choose one,’ his dad said, holding out the films in a fan, like a magician who wants you to pick a card. Mani couldn’t choose. Didn’t have the energy.*

*‘I went and got you ten bloody films and you can’t even chose one!’ This uncharacteristic explosion from his father made Mani jump up from the sofa and grab the first film he could. The Little Mermaid.*

*Mani watched a film he didn’t want to watch in a living room that felt alien. And all the food that had arrived with the steady stream of people had stopped too. His dad stood in the kitchen with a bag of frozen chips. He spread them out over a baking tray and put them in the oven. When he took them out, most of them were overdone on one side and soggy on the other. Some had stuck to the baking tray. But Mani ate them all the same.*

*‘Are they alright?’ his dad asked.*

*‘They’re good,’ Mani said.*

*His dad took a couple from Mani’s plate, chewed them, shook his head.*

*‘You don’t need to eat them,’ he said. Mani carried on eating.‘You don’t need to, I said. I can go and get a pizza instead.’*

*Mani ate every single chip. His dad sat in silence watching him. When he was done, he ruffled Mani’s hair and sat down beside him. He put an arm round his shoulder and kept it there through the whole film.*

*‘Things will get better, okay?’ he said to Mani. ‘I promise.’*

**May 2010**

‘Hope I’m not calling too early.’

‘Not at all,’ he mumbled, cleared his throat and said no again, louder and clearer this time. He took the phone away from his ear for a moment to check the time: 08.27. He’d not been up at this time since he took his exams.

‘We start early at the ministry.’ Marit Nymoen’s voice, which he remembered as soft, now felt loud and sharp.

‘Yes, right, I just ...’ he was too drowsy to think of a good excuse, but she didn’t seem to be looking for one either. She was cheerful and spoke fast.

‘As you know, you applied for a post here and someone else was selected, right?’

He felt the familiar irritation flare up. He tensed. ‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Well, the situation is this: that person has now withdrawn her application. She didn’t actually say as much, but as I understood it, she used our offer as leverage to get a permanent position in her current place of work. Perhaps not the best way of going about things ...’

‘Yes, ehm ... unfortunate.’ He stood up. Waited.

Marit Nymoen paused. ‘So, we wondered if you were still interested in the job?’

‘Yes,’ he replied, without hesitation.

‘We can give you some time to think about it.’

‘No, it’s not necessary.’

‘Right, okay, well.’ She laughed. He did too. Loudly. Giggled. Couldn’t help it.

‘Well, that’s wonderful. I’m really glad.’ She didn’t need to say it. He could hear it.

‘Me too,’ he said.

‘I think this will all work out very well. You’ll get on fine here. We’ll look after you. I’ll email a formal offer to you, and if you could send us your reply as soon as possible, that would be great.’

‘Okay.’

‘When can you start?’

‘Whenever you like.’

Just as they’d hope, the other people in the Summit Bar at the top of the Radisson Hotel on Holbergsplass were not like them, in terms of skin colour or age. They didn’t need to sit at a respectable distance from each other, and certainly didn’t. They each sat on a barstool, close together, him a shirt, her in a dress, looking out at the panoramic view of Oslo. She had a daiquiri, he had a whisky and coke, his signature drink, if he had one at all. He’d never liked beer. The smell inevitably reminded him of the alcoholics who used to gather on the benches around the square in Haugentstua, and the thought of sharing a bottle with them, even metaphorically, was enough to make him gag. Whisky felt more classy, more ambitious than the Finlandia, Absolutt Vodka, Smirnoff, Red Bull and Eldorado Tropical Nectar that had dominated the pre-and after parties of his adolescence.

He clinked her glass. Said “cheers” for the third time that evening.

‘I just knew things would work out,’ she said.

‘Same here,’ he said, the words so light with relief that he thought he might actually float up. He found it almost physically impossible to sit still. His leg twitched up and down, his fingers drummed on whatever they could find, her legs, his own legs, as they looked at over the city, at the palace and the park, the neon lights on the Odd Fellow building, the Freia sign on Karl Johan, the Highrise in the Government Quarter, which he proudly pointed out for her. She rested her head on his shoulder. He thought that he’d never loved her more, and said so. She smiled. Reciprocated.

They sat there for almost two hours, interrupted only by a trip to the bar. Before they left, they took a selfie together, then of each of them separately with the view in the background. They both posted the pictures of themselves on Facebook. “Believe in yourself = everything always works out”, he wrote. She wrote: “Celebrate ☺☺☺”.

They stood up, both of them a little unsteady, laughed at each other. She leant into him in the lift, put her arms round his neck, giggled, kissed him.

‘Shall we get a room?’ she asked. ‘I could say I was staying the night at Sonya’s.’ He would have taken her up on it, no hesitation, if he hadn’t maxed out his card at the bar.

‘Doubt there’ll be any rooms available,” he said.

‘We could ask,’ she said, her arms still round his neck, her face only centimetres from his. He could smell the alcohol on her mouth. Mixed with her sweet perfume and the smell of the hotel.

‘Have to help my dad with some stuff first thing tomorrow, anyway,’ he said, and immediately regretted not saying something else.

‘Like what?’ she asked in a low voice.

‘Drive him to the shops. Tomorrow’s his shopping day. He can’t carry it all by himself.’ He cringed.

‘Shopping day. Right.’ She let go of him and leant back against the lift wall, just before the doors opened with a pling. She went out first, and fast, within seconds he was several metres behind her. He thought that maybe she didn’t want to be seen coming out of the same lift as him. When she was some way ahead, she stopped and waited. Opened her mouth, but then closed it quickly again.

‘What’s up?’

‘You got a cigarette?’

He didn’t. She said that was fine, she didn’t really need one anyway. A tram rumbled past over Holbergs plass.

‘Shall we take the train?’ he asked.

She shrugged.

They walked down the hill and were almost at Tullinløkka when she stopped: ‘If we did get married, we could maybe live together alone for *a few* years first, then find somewhere bigger so your dad could move in?’

He shrugged and held up his hands. ‘Do we have to talk about that now?’

She looked at him, insistent.

‘Like ...’ he said, buying time. Still didn’t know what to say. ‘Ehm ... we can think about it.’ His attempt to close the matter, but instead he opened it right up.

‘Woohoo, can’t wait,’ she cried, and clapped her hands. ‘If we get married, that is.’

In a better mood, they walked to the train station. She chatted away. About the flat they might live in. She was already thinking about what part of town. Majorstua. Frogner. St Hanshaugen. She talked about wrought iron balconies. About sitting there with a glass of wine. He couldn’t help smiling at her, at them. He liked the two of them as they were now, liked the train they were on. A happy, tipsy couple, all dressed up, in a carriage half-full of tired teenagers who’d stayed on in town after school and weary adults who’d been working overtime. Even though they were sitting with them on the train as it went past Alna and Nyland, the industrial floor of the Grorud valley, surrounded by containers and square buildings, and graffiti that seemed to have been sprayed in a continuous wavy line from Gamlebyen out to Haugenstua, he felt he’d finally shown them his back.

The 08.12 train was already quite full and when Mani got on with all the other passengers at Haugenstua, he had to elbow his way through to Samir, who had got on four stops before at Fjellhammer, but hadn’t bothered, or been able to get a seat. When Samir saw him, he took off his big headphones and let them rest around his neck. They greeted one another as they always did, a hand shake, and brief touch of the right shoulder. The train pulled out of the station, leaving behind the concrete highrises of Haugenstua.

‘Is that what you wear to work?’ he asked, pointedly looking Samir up and down. Glasses, checked shirt, jeans, Converse shoes.

‘I’m wearing a shirt,’ Samir said, and shrugged. ‘Public sector.’

Mani had his shirt tucked into his suit trousers, and a pair of brown leather shoes, and he wished the Samir would stop saying “public sector” like he and those grumpy, sad women behind the desk at Stovner job centre were part of the same thing.

‘When do we get paid?’ he asked.

‘Man, you haven’t even worked a full day and you’re asking when we get paid,’ Samir laughed. ‘But it’s on the twelfth.’

‘Fuck,’ he said, checked the calendar on his mobile phone, but already knew that was over a week away. He kept his voice low, even though he knew there was no real danger that anyone around them cared. They were reading their papers, listening to music, staring sleepily at their phones or out the window.

‘Can you spare some bread?’

‘Sure. How much?’

‘A bag?’

Samir nodded.

‘What scale you on, by the way?’

It took a few moments before he realised what Samir meant. He wasn’t used to thinking about money on a scale, and had just said yes, when Marit told the starting scale was 42. It was only when he looked it up that he discovered it was 350,000 kroner a year, which after tax meant no more than 20,000 kroner a month. He tried to see it as so much more money than he already had, anything was more than that, and twenty grand could actually go quite far. But he couldn’t hide the fact he was disappointed, embarrassed even, and when he told Meena, he couldn’t tell her the truth, so he lied and said he earned 420,000.

‘Can’t remember,’ he said, in answer to Samir’s question.

‘You normally go up a scale or two after the first year,’ Samir said. ‘Then there’s a bit of a jump when you become an adviser, and an even bigger one when you’re appointed senior adviser.’

‘How do I become an adviser?’

‘You start as an executive officer, right, you work there for two-three years and become an adviser, then you work for another two-three years and you become a senior adviser.’

‘So, could it be faster if I work fucking hard?’

‘Nah, not really. I only became an adviser after I’d been there for two and half years.’

He nodded. It all sounded long-winded and standardised, but he wasn’t going to let that get him down. Samir had only given himself as an example, he thought. He would climb the ladder faster.

They got off at Oslo S, went into a 7-11, where Samir withdrew two 500-kroner notes and gave them to Mani. Then they carried on up Storgata to Youngstorget. He’d never really noticed the Highrise when he was at Youngstorget before, now he couldn’t see anything else. From the square it seemed to be even wider, even higher. He felt himself tense, his steps more controlled, shorter, fewer words. When they got the Government Quarter, Samir held out his hand and said something, and he didn’t even know if he shook it. Had no idea what Samir said. He looked at his watch. He was eight minutes early.

He stood motionless in front of the Y-Block, so tense now that he wasn’t able to move. He looked at the people streaming past him. A middle-aged man, dressed in tight-fitting cycling gear, who got off his bike and secured it to one of the many bike stands in front of the building. An older woman talking on the phone. Two young men, one dressed much like Samir, the other more like himself. They said “yeah, true enough” and laughed as they went in the doors. They looked so relaxed, he thought. As if this little world, right here, in the Government Quarter in Oslo, Norway, had been made exclusively for them. Confident and professional. He imagined them sitting in meetings, pointing at enlarged graphs, leafing through thick documents and discussing with serious faces. It struck him that it was the first time in years that he’d stopped. That he was at least part of the way to where he wanted to be. That he no longer had everything to achieve, but all the more to prove for that.

His nerves had not only arrested his steps, but also dried and cracked his lips, pulled a tight band across his forehead, which felt clammy and warm to touch. This made him even more uncomfortable, but more than anything, he was annoyed by how nervous he was. That he didn’t just push on, stride right in and announce his arrival, but was standing anxiously outside. As though he was nothing more than a regurgitation of the worst sides of his father’s genes. The thought made him sick. What was he doing?

He shook his head, as if to laugh at himself, got a grip and walked straight for the doors of the Y-Block.

The receptionist asked him wait on sofa at the other end of the reception area, under a large piece of art that looked like it had been carved into of the wall itself, and was of a kind of macabre bird. He sat there for a few minutes and watched the receptionist struggle to print out visitors badges for a large group, and then Marit came walking towards him with a big smile.

‘Hi Mani! Sorry, sorry. I’m a bit late, I know. The management team have a morning meeting on Mondays and there was something we needed to sort out.’ She looked like she wanted to give him a hug, but instead held out her hand, and as they shook hands, she put the other on his shoulder and released any nervousness that remained.

‘Come,’ she said, tapped her card on the barrier, went through and indicated to the security guard that he should open the gate for Mani. She led him into a cylindrical stairwell. A broad spiral staircase filled the entire cylinder, which was bathed in natural light from the glass roof at the top. Marit, dressed in typical office clothes, a skirt and blouse, but with trainers that looked out of place, more suited to the forest and outdoors than an office, took the stairs two at a time. He struggled to keep up. When they got to the second floor, his heart was thumping whereas she seemed barely to skip a beat. They went down a curved corridor, there seemed to be curves everywhere, which led to a long row of offices which Marit pointed to as she hurried past. ‘That’s where Henning sits, we’ll say hello to him afterwards.’ ‘Hi Hanne, this is Mani, we’ll come by later.’ And then they were standing in an empty office. There was one of those ergonomic desks at the short end, by the window, which continued down one of the long walls. A computer and screen near the window. A black office chair with wide arms and head support in front of the screen, as well as two other chairs at the far end of the desk, which functioned as a kind meeting table. On the long wall opposite there was a bookshelf, with one document, the government’s budget proposal for 2010.

‘Welcome,’ she said, and opened her arms. He sat down and tried out the office chair. It was comfortable.

‘Everything should be set up and ready for you. There are already some meetings on Outlook. Department meetings, intro courses, that sort of thing.’

He nodded.

‘You’ll have to excuse me,’ she said, and put her hand on his should again, gave him an encouraging pat. ‘I have a meeting to go to. I’ll drop by again as soon as I’m done.’ She was halfway out the door already. ‘You can take a look at the budget proposal in the meantime. Familiarise yourself.’

He stayed sitting in the chair. Heard the squeak of Marit’s trainers fade. Span round on the chair, immediately felt ashamed and put his feet down firmly on the floor. Turned on the computer, which informed him that it was updating. He yawned, felt that his six hours of sleep had been at least two too few, wondered if he should go out and buy a coffee, but then realised that he didn’t have a staff card and didn’t want to bother Marit.

He left the office and went in search of a coffee machine, wandered disoriented along the curved corridors, but tried to look as though he knew where he was going and smiled back that those passing who greeted him with a nod and tight smile. He had more or less walked in a circle when he finally found a small kitchenette near a group of sofas. There was an almost full pot of coffee on the peculator. He touched it, it was still warm, so he took a cup from the cupboard above and poured himself some.

‘Hi, are you here for a meeting?’

He turned around. A young woman, not much older than him, with a fringe that hung down in her eyes, was looking at him questioningly. ‘That coffee’s for a meeting,’ she said, and pointed at his cup.

‘Oh, sorry,’ he smiled sheepishly, before adding, almost like a confession, ‘I work here, it’s my first day.’

‘Ah, I just saw the badge. ‘

He looked down at the visitor’s badge he still had on his jacket.

‘Kaja.’ She held out her hand. He shook it. Then she pushed past him, took the coffee pot and disappeared down the corridor.

Back by his office, he looked around to see if anyone was nearby, before taking a couple of photos, first of the name beside the door, then the office itself. He sent them to Meena and Samir. He logged in to the computer, opened Outlook and confirmed his attendance at the meetings. Other than that, his inbox was empty. He looked at the organisation chart that Marit had printed out for him, an A4 sheet full of boxes and arrows. He was part of the schools department, which was headed by Director General Alf Tømmerbakke. The department was divided into two sections, one was for quality development, led by Sverre Dahl, and the other for budget and financial control led by Hege. There were a number of groups under each section, such as the analysis group, the curriculum group, and his own, the budget group. These groups were managed by various deputy director generals, and his line manager was Marit. The deputy director generals reported to either Sverre or Hege, who in turn reported to Alf. He memorised the chart as best he could, then went over to the bookshelf and took down the budget proposal. Flicked through it, read some of what was written about the government’s investment in children and education. It was a mixture of general promises and visions, like “All Children Should Have a Safe and Good Upbringing”, and more specific measures which didn’t mean much to him, such as tackling bullying by “strengthening school-based programmes such as PALS, Zero and Olweus”. He was far more excited by the money. The figures were in the thousands, and more often than not ran to four or five digits. He was less thrilled by the endless tables, with indicators of everything from the number of nursery school places and the dropout rate for secondary education, to the number of person-years allocated to special needs education. He’d had a cup of coffee, but still had to stop himself from nodding off, and his gaze was constantly being drawn from the endless tables to the window, he looked out at the life on Akersgate, full of buses and people, and up at the enormous church that stood a stone’s throw away, where the pale arms of drugs addicts who were squatting in a circle on the grass behind the church looked even paler against the green.

He shook his head, rubbed his face and put the government budget to one side for a few seconds. He logged into Facebook, scrolled for a bit before he stopped at something Ivan had posted at one o’clock that morning.

*Never trust a snake. A snake will always be a snake!*

He didn’t really know what he meant by it. The same could be said of other things. There were just two likes and one comment. The comment was a question mark from Selma. He ignored the post, opened Messenger. Selma wasn’t online, but he sent her a message anyway.

Haha, guess who’s at work. In the Ministry of Children, Education and Training.

He had just picked up the budget again when someone rapped twice on his open door. A young man, dressed in such tight jeans that his kneecaps looked like they were trying to escape, a t-shirt with “Inferno” written across the chest and a jacket, popped his head in through the door.

‘Busy?’ he said, and sat down on the desk. Mani shook his head.

‘So you’re sitting here reading the yellow book?’

‘Huh?’

‘Yellow Book, Prop 1,’ he said, and pointed at the government budget in Mani’s hand.

Mani put the book down. Look at the front cover. Prop. 1 St. 2009-2010. The yellow cover.

‘The government’s budget proposal is called the Yellow Book, until it’s debated in the Storting, then after all the negotiations, the fun and games, when the money is moved around, the budget that’s finally passed is called the Blue Book.’

Mani nodded, enlightened.

‘If only you knew the blood, sweat and tears that went into every word. Look at the top of page 131.’

Mani turned to the page. Read out loud: ‘Pilot project – apprenticeship for nursery school staff. 5 million kroner.’

‘I wrote that. Do you know how long it took us to write that *one* sentence? How many rounds we had to do with Finance and Local Government and Regional Development? Jesus ...’ He sighed. ‘The fights for five million kroner. 5 million! It’s nothing. Peanuts and politics. You’ve got plenty to look forward to.’

Mani had no idea what he was talking about, but he liked him, liked the way he spoke.

‘Jan Tore, sorry, forgot that bit,’ he said and jumped down. Held his hand out to Mani.

‘Your mentor, did Marit not tell you?’

‘No,’ Mani said. ‘She was in a rush.’

‘Get used to it.’ He sighed again. ‘Come on then, let’s get you a staff card.’

He followed Jan Tore to a small room that could only be entered from outside, but was still part of the Y-Block, right under another artwork blasted into the wall, only this was a fish, not a bird, but done with the same simple lines. His photograph was taken and five minutes later he saw his own face on a shiny new staff card.

Jan Tore had a meeting to go to, and he was left on his own again. Hungry, but he didn’t want to ask where the canteen was, so he went down to Vinny’s Kebab on Youngstorget. He smiled, partly to the owner who gave him a nod, partly to himself. When he was growing up, going out for a kebab was a leisure activity in itself, like playing basketball or hanging out in someone’s room. In high school, when they’d enough money, they often went for a kebab two or three times a week, and if they had even more money, and some of them went into town to buy clothes, the shopping spree always ended in a kebab shop, most often Vinny’s. The bags at their feet made the place even smaller, the black, scratched tables were too big, so the scraping of chairs on the floor to make space was part of the soundtrack, along with the owner’s constant banter and the carving of kebab meat.

His open jacket revealed the staff card on a lanyard round his neck, but he still took the opportunity to tell the owner that he was in a rush today, as he was at work, up at the ministry. The owner wasn’t as impressed as he’d hoped, mainly because a group of teenage girls came in at the same time and had clearly not checked if they had enough money for everything they ordered, which led to a deafening discussion. Halfway through the kebab, his dad rang.

‘What are you up to?’

‘Out for a bite to eat.’

‘You said you were going to work.’

‘I am, just having something to eat.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Kebab shop in town.’

‘Don’t eat that rubbish, please. I’ll make some proper food when you get home.’

‘Okay.’

‘Are you coming straight home?’

‘Yes.’

‘What sort of time will that be?’

‘I’ll be home by five.’

‘Okay.’

When he got back to the office, Marit popped in. She apologised for being so busy and said that she wouldn’t be able to introduce him to people today, as she’d promised.

‘They called from the nursery. Jonas has been sick,’ she said. ‘But Jan Tore will do it instead, okay?’

It was an exhausting round. Jan Tore took him from office to office. His jaw ached from all the smiling and his mouth was dry from saying the same thing over and over again. ‘Mani. Economist. I’m going to work with the budget.’ All the names, faces and specialisations blurred into one. Some seemed delighted to have an audience, and Jan Tore had to say tactfully that they needed to move on, others barely looked up from the screen. The last person was Kaja, who was considerably nicer than when he’d met her first thing.

‘Hi,’ she said. She was sitting on the chair with her legs tucked under her chair. There was a steaming cup of coffee on the desk. On the wall to the right of the desk was a small poster, no bigger than A4, which said: “Hipsters ruin everything.”

‘Sorry about this morning, I was a bit stressed. We had some people over from Udir and I’d forgotten to make the coffee, and I was about to set up a Powerpoint when I realised I’d forgotten the coffee and it was all a mess.’

‘Udir is the Directorate for Education and Training, internalease or jargon, if you like,’ Jan Tore said. ‘Kaja used to be in the budget group as well, and still helps us with some of the statistics and indicators, but she mainly works for the analysis group now. They’re like our analysis experts.’

‘Like?’ Kaja said and rolled her eyes.

‘They go through all the research reports and decipher and summarise them, real geeks.’

Kaja stuck her tongue out at him. ‘Says the man who wouldn’t come to the Øya festival because he was so tired after working on the budget.’ She smiled to Mani, as though looking to prove just how dull Jan Tore was. Mani smiled back.

‘I did go, just not on the Wednesday.’

‘The Wednesday was best. Bon Iver were epic,’ she said.

The flat in Haugenstua smelt of homemade food. He’d barely sat down at the table when his dad carried a sizzling wok over and asked him to get out a trivet so he could put it down. Fried noodles with chicken, carrots, broccoli, onion and chilli. He’d also got some chopsticks, and insisted they should eat with them.

‘Tastes better,’ he assured Mani. That was easy for him to say, he actually managed to pick up some food. Mani struggled to master the technique. His father tried to show him, he even grabbed his hands to demonstrate the right grip. It reminded Mani of when he was little and his dad tried to show him how to tie laces. In the end he’d asked if he couldn’t just have Velcro instead of laces. He ignored his father’s disapproving grunts and got himself a fork from the drawer.

When they’d finished eating, he told his dad about his first day at work as they carried the wok and dishes out to the kitchen. Went to get his staff card and showed it to his dad, who unlike the owner of the kebab shop, studied it in detail.

‘Very good, Mani, very good,’ he said several times, ‘I hope it will be a good job for you.’

**May 2010**

Every morning was the same. He had a shower and ate breakfast. His dad got up early every day to make it, seemed to like doing it, the routine, most often eggs, an omelette. French-inspired some days with cheese, chopped parsley and toast, or Indian with garam masala, coriander, chilli and roti. When he’d eaten, he got dressed, generally chinos and a shirt, with a trench coat on top if it was cold. Took the lift down, if it wasn’t already full of working people and school children; if it was, the click-clack of his good shoes on the stone stairs probably woke everyone in the block who wasn’t already awake. Outside on the street, his shoes continued to clack on the asphalt and any gravel that had survived the spring clean-up and sweepers, as he walked quickly along the avenue of small trees that cut between the concrete blocks, like a river through a ravine. He followed the road down to the underpass. Here he quite often broke into a run if he saw the train pulling into the station, but more often than not it was late, so there was no need to rush. He got on the last carriage, where Samir was waiting.

He didn’t stop outside the Y-Block, but went straight in, as proud of his staff card as the day he got it. He’d noticed that a lot of his colleagues took their cards off when they left the building. He never did. He wore like a gold chain and he was still a pupil at Stovner high school. He nodded to the receptionists and security guards, and got a kick every time he said “excuse me, I just need to get past” to visitors who stood hovering and waiting by the barrier.

Once he was inside the Y-Block, his working day was more varied. On the second day at work, he’d gone to his first departmental meeting. They were held every Tuesday at 9am. The meeting took place in a kind of central hall between the various sections in the department. The director general Alf Tømmerbakke and his staff had their offices there, and otherwise there were several sofa groups, tables and chairs. He’d followed Jan Tore, who went to sit with Kaja and some others from her section in the corner, mostly younger people. Otherwise people sat wherever they found a place, but the older staff, those who were over sixty, seemed to have gathered in another corner. Marit, Hege and the rest of the management team were at the front. Alf Tømmerbakke chaired the meeting. He was an older man, still slim, but his face had the telltale signs of a heavy smoker. His voice was gruff, but pleasant. He talked about current matters, like the imminent white paper on eighth to tenth grade that was due to be debated before the summer, it looked like they’d manage to meet all the deadlines, but there were still some important points to be clarified with the politicians, such as the extent to which local councils could opt in or out of optional subjects, the big news in this paper, and the extent to which they could make their own selection from what Tømmerbakke called “a bouquet of optional subjects with state-regulated teaching plans” or whether the ministry would insist that all councils offer all subjects as options. Work on the government budget was ongoing. He nodded at Hege and Marit. They nodded back. The department would soon have to submit its proposal for the budgetary framework agreed at the conference in March. He reminded everyone that it was important that they meet deadlines from the Ministry of Finance, because they knew how strict FIN were about deadlines. He added ‘even though they never keep them themselves.’ Laughter rippled around the central hall. Mani joined in, just in case.

‘Any other news from the sections?’ Tømmerbakke asked.

Sverre stood up. ‘I would like to say a few words.’

Jan Tore looked at Kaja and pulled a face. Mani looked at them quizzically.

‘He can never *not* say anything,’ Kaja sighed.

‘Well, as it usual, it’s been a busy week in our section. I think it’s important that we work hard on the tasks we’ve been given ...’ Sverre talked for a while about ongoing work, before saying that they had a new colleague. Trond Kristoffersen. ‘Would you like to tell us a bit about yourself, Trond?’ Sverre asked. Trond got up from his place in the middle of the hall and went to the front. He stood there for a few seconds without saying anything, just smiled, looked around the hall, as though he was gauging his audience, and seemed to be as satisfied with himself as he was with them.

‘Thank you. Very good to be here,’ he said, and clapped his hands. ‘My name is Trond Kristoffersen, and I’m the most boring man in Norway.’ Another ripple of laughter ran through the hall. Mani laughed, even though he thought it was an odd way to introduce yourself.

‘I’m not exaggerating,’ Kristoffersen said. ‘Middle-aged, receding hairline, live in a terraced house, have a cabin at Sjursjøen and drive an SUV with a ski rack on the roof and two kids in the back. Typical family man, in other words.’

More laughter. More nods. Mani thought about the fathers he knew in Haugenstua, and with the exception of the hair perhaps, Kristoffersen was not particularly typical.

Trond told them more about himself. About his previous job in the research institute NIFU STEP, about his wife, who worked at Oslo University College, about his children, a boy and a girl, who were 13 and 10, about Hvalstad where they lived, about their involvement in the local football team and brass band, and his growing interest in cycling, in fact, he’d even cycled all the way in to work that day.

‘As though my life depended on it,’ he added, which was met with understanding nods.

When Trond sat down, it was Hege’s turn to stand up. To Mani’s surprise, she looked at him.

‘Alf has already said a little about the budget, so I won’t repeat that. There is a fair amount happening in terms of legislation and Chapter 9a, but as it’s complicated, so I think it might be better to do a separate session on that. But we also have a new colleague in our section. Most of you will already have met him, but perhaps you’d like to say a few words about yourself, Mani, in case there’s anyone here who hasn’t met you yet?’

No one had warned him that he might have to say something, so he wasn’t prepared at all. He stood up, slightly flustered, and started to introduce himself: ‘Hi, my name is ...,’ then remembered that Trond had gone to the front. ‘Sorry, two seconds,’ he said, hurried to the front, and started again. ‘Ehm, so, hi. My name is Mani.’

He told them how old he was. Where and what he’d studied. That he was going to be working on the government budget. The same as he’d done when he went round to meet everyone, only he hadn’t needed to say more then, as everyone had something they wanted to say too. But now he was on his own at the front and couldn’t think of anything else to tell them. He kept his hands behind his back to begin with, but his arms now seemed to cross themselves in front of their own accord. ‘Ehm,’ he struggled to find Sverre’s ease and Trond’s humour, the only things he could think of somehow didn’t fit in. A flat in Haugenstua. An Opel Astra. A disrupted youth and a taxi-driver father who’d taken early retirement.

He glanced over at Marit, but other than give an encouraging smile, she couldn’t help. Hege looked like she had at the interview, slightly impatient and keen to haul out of him anything he might have to say.

‘Yes, and you’re from Groruddalen,’ she stated, rather than asked. ‘Haugerud, was it?’

‘Haugenstua,’ he said.

‘Yes, well, they’re very close, aren’t they?’ She looked uncomfortable at being corrected.

For a few seconds he thought he should just agree, get it over and done with.

‘Yes, kind of,’ he said, and hoped it gave people a reference point, because the two other possibilities, Stovner and Furuset, were not particularly attractive. ‘Haugenstua is right by Høybråten.’

‘Exactly, yes,’ Hege said. ‘Is there anything else you’d like to say?’

He hesitated again.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Thank you.’

He went and sat down again.

‘Did I say too little?’ he asked Jan Tore when the meeting was over and they were walking down the corridor back to their offices.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Jan Tore said cheerfully. ‘As long as I don’t have to listen to another man getting off about his bike, I’m happy.’

Other than the departmental meeting, his first week had been largely taken up by introductory courses. One on the Freedom of Information Act, another on the Public Administration Act. Both courses were for new employees from all the ministries, not just his own, and the mercifully short presentation rounds were awash with acronyms. NHD, Ministry of Trade and Industry. KUD, Ministry of Culture. KRD, Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development. FIN, Ministry of Finance. HOD, Ministry of Health and Care Services. And so it continued through the ministerial terrain. He found the courses long, overwhelmingly tedious, technical and detailed, with one exception, and that was only in part: a purely internal course where the various departments in his own ministry were presented by each director and the whole thing was then closed by the secretary general. Again, the course was too long, and the presentations of the different departments, all as complex as his own with sections and groups and teams, made his head spin, the flow charts and colour codes that were supposed to help you visualise the whole thing, all started to merge until the organisation chart was like a blurry watercolour and he couldn’t separate the various components. He didn’t expect much when finally it was the secretary general’s turn. Guri Borrebæk was around fifty and not easy to spot where she stood leaning against the grey, stone wall.

Like those before her, she had a PowerPoint presentation, but with only one slide. A quote from Plato’s *The Republic.*

*“They must raise the eye of the soul to the universal light which lightens all things, and behold the absolute good; for that is the pattern according to which they are to order the State and the lives of individuals.”*

She continued to lean against the wall while she gave them time to read. Then she said: ‘Over the top?’

They smiled. All a little uncertain.

‘Of course it’s over the top,’ she said, and moved away from the wall. Her step, like her voice, was lighter and more supple than he’d expected. ‘But I still think it’s a great quote. Those of us who work in the civil service *should* strive for high ideals.’

He liked the fact that she consistently said civil servants, not bureaucrats or executive officers, and the way she talked about their unique role in society. The team spirit she instilled. They were there to serve the country, the government and the prime minister, but also to serve the law and professionalism. To be a secretariat for political leaders, to provide politicians with the best possible information on which to base their decisions, but never to be political themselves. She spoke as though they were what stood between the country’s success or ruin. He was happy to accept her big words about them, about him, as if they could wash away his own few, small words at the departmental meeting. Her presentation lasted no more than half an hour and was followed by trays of open sandwiches, but when Jan Tore popped by his office later in the day, he still felt a glow in his heart.

‘Time for the wine raffle and Friday coffee,’ Jan Tore said. ‘Think Torunn has made an almond cake today, woohoo!’ He pumped his hands to the ceiling. ‘Come down to the central hall,’ he shouted as he disappeared down the corridor.

He was about to get up when there was a knock on the door. An older woman from another department looked in.

‘Are you Mani?’ she asked. He confirmed that he was. The woman came into the office and handed him a brochure. *Working in the Ministry of Children, Education and Training* it said above a photograph of three smiling, young people standing outside the Y-Block.

‘It’s a recruitment brochure that we use for students and other groups,’ she said.

‘I see,’ he said. He flicked through it. There weren’t many pages. Bullet points of what you could expect from the ministry as an employer and a short interview with each of the three people in the photograph.

‘And ...’ she could hardly contain her enthusiasm now, ‘we’re in the process of updating the brochure, and heard that you’d started, so we wondered, that’s to say admin and HR, if we could possibly include you too? Just a photograph and a short interview for the brochure and the website.’

‘Yes, of course,’ he said.

‘Excellent,’ the woman said, with a big smile. ‘Everyone will be very pleased to hear that.’