

The frozen Nitelv River, between home and Norwegian class.

Norwegian Light

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Olav and Gunborg at the kitchen table, years later, in 2006.

Besides, a journey cannot be a journey without a beginning....

I remember ice. It was a winter's night we walked across the car park of Oslo's old Fornebu Airport, when I was eighteen. Oslo had a light as I'd never seen, of a soft cloudy grey variety delivered in small parcels by the illumination of the lampposts. It was a light of punctuation rather than words. The trolley slid and I slipped a bit as I followed my new host father to the space he'd found for the car. I felt my chin freezing. Along with the astonishment of being for the first time beyond Australia I held a minor measure of disappointment. My host father was old.

All the Rotary exchange students from Australia had been met by their families, where we would billet for the first three weeks in an Oslo satellite town, Lillestrøm, in order to attend an introductory Norwegian language course before travelling to our final destinations across the country to spend the year. I was the last to be met and I wondered if they'd forgotten me, whoever they were. When he did arrive he was tall and slim, Olav, with cotton thread hair in white and a red glow about his cheeks. He was the clean cut younger brother of Santa Claus. Olav wore glasses and must've been in his seventies. I imagined playing bingo in a retirement home.

He'd brought a jacket I had to put on, doing up the zipper then the outside studs until the collar pushed the underside of my chin. He'd arranged my scarf and there was a beanie and ski gloves. I was more clad than at anytime previously for that