

A Lillestr m street with Christmas decorations.

window. She knew the exact temperature from the thermometer affixed outside the glass pane and from past days she knew the ice was thick.

Walking on ice was a skill to learn, not only on the Nitelv but on the footpaths too; and it came in handy, later, in Hatiya, when fearlessly negotiating the muddy back roads of the monsoon. There's something similar about the stepping lightly and placing your body weight with care.

Of all meals in Rælingen breakfast was my favourite. We ate slices of brown bread with paté and gherkins, herring in tomato sauce, Gunborg's homemade apple jam, cold meats and cheeses: there was Jarlsberg with the holes, 'key' cheese with the little crunchy brown pieces in it, goat's cheese and the soft caramel tasting brown cheese for which Norway is famous. We'd swallow a teaspoon of cod liver oil washed down with milk, orange juice or filter coffee.

The evenings shared were often given to pointing at things, with me repeating the Norwegian name; not unlike what would later occur in the tea shops of Hatiya as the villagers taught Bangla. Sometimes we used dictionaries and Gunborg made sure there was a pad by the kitchen table to supplement with doodles the communication struggle. I practiced the basic phrases from class and learnt new vocabulary. They also asked things: Olav once enquired if when one had had enough to eat it was possible to say, 'no thanks, I'm fed up.' It was the dictionary that divulged why Gunborg's food was as it was: she'd spent her working life as a home economics teacher.

And it was truly remarkable to have these new, varied and detailed Norwegian memories. I'd even seen Ingrid from their optometrist business, a tradition their younger sons had continued, appear on a love match TV game show and I hoped she'd find someone nice. It was strange that I cared about anything so specific occurring at the far end of the world.

I used to wonder about the simplest differences: the thoughts behind the habits and the décor of Rælingen. Why was the Norwegian concept of how a room should be altogether different? How had light taken its Norwegian meaning? What of more complex ideas?



Lillestr m squarea.



Lillestr m town centre.

It is the caveman drawings of my thoughts I write of, the zero point. Thoughts are culture shaped and predictable most of the time; they're barely ours. But in Norway there were thoughts in the curtains, in the spreading of butter upon bread and in the lacing up of boots by the door: new thoughts to be had, everywhere. And those first days in Rælingen were for my thinking as the fabled first primeval steps of prehistoric animals, from the swamp onto the land.

Sometimes I consider that although my body had been born in Sydney eighteen years earlier, my thoughts are creatures of the icicles that crunched underfoot and dangled from the lamp-posts at old Fornebu Airport, in Oslo, on that first evening when I met Olav.

As it happened, my journey started with ice. ■