Sample translation

From *COMING HOME*

(Trollefossvegen 23. Tilbake til heimbygda)

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Published by Samlaget, Oslo, 2022

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Translated with support from NORLA

 Agent: NORTHERN STORIES

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**The Feeling of Home**

The feeling isn’t there all the time. Far from it, in fact. It’s like sunshine during a Western Norwegian autumn: unpredictable and rare; impossible to plan for or store up.

But when it does appear, when the feeling shines through on a perfectly ordinary day and often when I least expect it – like when I’m sitting on the still greyish-brown springtime lawn with a tepid cup of coffee in my hand and happen to look around me – it isn’t that I’m looking at anything different from what I’ve seen every day now for a while: a red house with a black roof, a brown outbuilding, a nondescript tree in the middle of the yard and a glimpse of the fjord. It’s the fact that all at once I’m seeing it differently. With my whole self, in a way: my whole self, wide open.

This is mine – or ours, because there are two of us involved – and just look at everything we’ve achieved in only a few months. Suddenly, instead of seeing everything that remains to be done, all I see is what we’ve already managed. I see the fence we braided from branches between the road and the decking we made from some leftover slate tiling we had lying around. I listen to the birds twitter away happily on our land of their own free will. Or I walk past the wheelbarrow in the woodshed and it dawns on me that I really am the owner of a wheelbarrow now, and that makes me think about the many possibilities this simple fact creates, the many things I can use it for – and all this adds up to the feeling of home.

On good days, it's a feeling that smells of mastery, tastes of pride and overflows with pure and simple happiness. But on bad days, this existence can also fill me with restlessness, stress and unease: when everything takes so much more time than planned, when two is the loneliest number to be – and, by the way, when did happiness become watching a ski biathlon in the sofa nook instead of conquering yet another peak?

This is not a book about great dangers. It isn’t about prize-winning feats or innovations that change the course of history, either. No, this book is about something that most of us attempt at least once in our lifetime: settling down in one place, buying a house and building a home.

A book about a perfectly ordinary life, in other words. Or is it?

For one thing, I – Siri, the writer of this book – moved house more than thirty times in the first thirty-seven years of my life, and I’ve lived in five counties and five countries. Because I’ve always been far more scared of taking out a mortgage and becoming a homeowner than, for example, hitchhiking alone across Europe to a farm in Portugal where I plan to work as a volunteer. Just picturing the rest of one’s life is hard enough.

How much harder, then, to consider living my whole life in the same spot. Yet this is precisely what I’ve set out to do. I’ve bought myself a home, which means that I’m planning to spend my next thirty-seven years living in just one place: Trollefossvegen, in Bakke, in the small village of Holmedal, beside Dalsfjorden, which is pretty far west in the county formerly known as Sogn og Fjordane

Will I pull this off? I’m not sure. And if I do, what will it take for me to successfully settle down?

Of course, a dream helps. And I have one. I have many dreams in my life – some short-lived, others more enduring – but I reckon this one has been with me more or less forever: the dream of achieving some degree of self-sufficiency; the dream of potato fields, chickens, the traditional tree in the centre of the farmyard and animals that know me better than anyone else; of tasks that are repeated, year in year out, in a seasonal merry-go-round.

Only one thing stood in the way of realising my Dream with a capital D: I had to dare put down roots somewhere.

Now I’ve started to dare. I say started because a house that has been bought on the open market can, of course, be sold again. I can jump off the carousel of homeownership whenever I feel like it, just as I’ve solved problems so many times before by simply moving on.

Yet part of me believes that something is different now. Something that can make me stay: I’ve discovered the joy of work.

Hang on, though – isn’t a home the place where we’re supposed to relax not work? Well, it depends how we define work. In my book, a home is more than just a thing you buy from an estate agent.

A home is something we create for ourselves. I need a home to live in, but I *want* a home in order to create: to build up, to tear down, to learn by trial and error – for myself and the man I live with, who is, of course, a far from insignificant factor; on the contrary, he’s an indispensable part of the equation.

Without my partner, Asle, this home wouldn’t have happened. Neither of us could have done it without the other, and while that’s a good thought, it’s also horribly frightening, because suddenly everything is at stake: what if our pairing doesn’t work? Will the whole thing come tumbling down?

All this and plenty more I will discover in the near future as I embark on this project of transforming a house, an enormous outbuilding and a garden into a home.

Somehow or another, we have created a world where even this is a way of demonstrating resistance: a world that prizes citizens of the world and pigeonholes people who are rooted in one place alongside reactionary populists.

At the same time, the corona pandemic has shown many of us the value of staying put, of savouring the pleasure of taking our environment firmly in hand – whether by refurbishing that old chest of drawers in the hall, planting new fruit trees in the garden or discovering that we can still knit even though it’s thirty years since we last tried. The small pleasures.

Why are there so many of us who dream of a more tranquil life in the countryside and so few who actually live that dream? What would it take to make more of those dreams a reality? What would it take to make *my* dream a reality? And what if that reality doesn’t look the way I imagined it would?

There’s no getting away from the fact that settling down in one place means closing other doors: turning down opportunities elsewhere, not seeking out exciting alternatives to the life I now live. Will I be up to it?

I’ll give myself a year. One year to find out if I’m a person who can settle down, who can declare herself content to have moved back to her hometown, or if it suits me best to carry on living out of a backpack.

And I’ll write along the way – because that’s the one thing I can’t stop doing. So the pages that follow will reveal whether I’ve succeeded: let the trial year at Trollefossvegen No. 23 commence!

**Chapter 1:**

**We Start with what Needs to be Done**

**What Shall We Do First?**

The axe I’m holding isn’t one of the bigger ones. We’re not talking some huge, heavy wood-chopping axe here, but a natty little tool with a straight and relatively narrow cutting edge, designed to make precise incisions and create smooth surfaces.

And that’s a good thing. Because the material I’m using it on isn’t some rough log. No, I’m chopping away at my own living room wall, no less; and that living room wall is a centuries-old log wall. I feel far from confident as I hack away, trying to remove rotten and worm-eaten wood to create a smooth surface of old but healthy timber. It will be overlaid with new timber, so what I’m doing won’t be visible in the end. But it still has to be done properly and if I wasn’t quite prepared for the fact that this axe would be one of the first tools I’d be using after buying myself an admittedly old but nonetheless fully functioning house – well that’s just the way things go.

It's next-level stuff, the mingled joy and terror I’m feeling here – over having my own living room walls, which I co-own with the man I love best in the world and which we are going to shape together – take responsibility for, agree upon, and shape into a shared home.

Late in October 2019 – at the time of writing, that’s roughly one-and-a-half years ago – my partner Asle Espeseth and I bought ourselves a house on a road called Trollefossvegen. And it wasn’t just any old house either, and above all it wasn’t in just any old place: the house was several centuries old and the village where it’s located is called Holmedal and is the place where I grew up.

In mid-November of the same year, we took possession of the house. On a Friday afternoon, we signed the papers digitally, shook the seller’s hand and moved straight in. Our first vanload of belongings contained masses of tools, a small kitchen table, two spindle-backed chairs and a coffeepot.

And then we sat there that first evening in our kitchen, with its old red cupboard doors and walls painted two shades of blue and linoleum flooring pretending to be slate tiles. There we sat, Asle and I – each on our own spindle-backed chair, each with a body full of tension, each with a cup full of boiled coffee – and looked around.

“So this is where we’re going to grow old, is it?” Asle says with a twinkle in his eye. There often is one.

I look at him. I twinkle back and just can’t help saying it:

“Well, yeah – but not at the same time!”

And it’s true: I won’t grow old at the same time as my boyfriend. While I’ve caught up with him in a few areas over the several years we’ve been together – like running uphill and hammering nails and target-shooting (though I haven’t yet worked up the nerve to challenge him to an arm-wrestling match) – the one thing I’ll never catch up with him on is age: He will always be 22 years older than me.

Asle Espeseth and I met beneath a sail. The time was winter 2018 and the place was Florø, the westernmost town in Norway. I’d moved there to work as a volunteer on a splendid old sailing ship called “Svanhild”, which I dreamed of sailing far and wide. Asle had already been living in the town for 20 years (he grew up on Askrova, an island just off Florø), and just happened to have signed up for a sail-making course. I wanted to take the course too, and although it was great sewing sails, it was even greater to sit near this small, strong man with his grey-black pony tail and his name rather clumsily tattooed on his fingers by his very own hand. Asle had a sailing boat himself, it turned out, and a great interest in all things old and maritime – just like me. Once the sail was finished, Asle took to turning up on board the “Svanhild” too, and the task we were working on at the time – splicing a rotten main mast – was no less exciting as a result.

We spent several weeks side by side in a cold and noisy industrial hall as we worked our socks off to make sure the mast would be ready by the Wednesday when the ship was due to set off on the traditional Whitsun trip to Shetland. The night before our departure, Asle hoisted me up the main mast, which had now been raised again. The mast was fully rigged and all the lines were threaded right except for one thing: a rope block fairly high up on the mast was hung the wrong way up. Someone had to go up the mast and turn it around, and that someone was me, with Asle on the other end of the line. Dangling there, 28 metres above deck, I couldn’t have felt safer.

And even though I’d actually decided that life was absolutely fine as a solo venture and he had actually decided the same thing, that’s not how it turned out. He and I became us instead. We had the same dreams, we discovered, of living self-sufficiently off land and sea in a fairly laidback way, of a carpentry workshop, a cabin in the mountains. Because Asle is by no means too old to dream; far from it – even writing that down is too ridiculous for words. Asle is curious and playful and open in a way which demonstrates that “age is only a number” is more than just a cliché. I don’t feel young when I’m with Asle. I just feel like I’m not scared of getting older any more.

And now we’ve bought this house, this garden, this outbuilding, this yard, together. Asle has moved to a completely new place. I, on the other hand, have moved home.

Home to Holmedal, to the village where I spent the first 16 years of my life. A village with a few hundred inhabitants, a primary school, a church in need of restoration, a knife factory and really not much else besides. The shops that were here when I was little are gone. The football team is no longer called Holmedal but is named after the municipality, Askvoll, instead. With just over 3,000 inhabitants, Askvoll is what you might call a classic rural coastal municipality, with one feeble foot in the fishing industry and the other, soon to be equally frail, in agriculture, with a proud industrial history now reduced to a tiny if vibrant remnant of production, but where the municipality itself is the largest employer by a long way.

This is where I will live, which means I’ve joined the statistical group of those who move back home. I have taken the supposedly big, scary and/or yearned-for step of moving from Florø, with its small but still urban town centre, to a village where there are plenty of people who – if the prejudices hold true – probably think they know who I am based on who I once was.

At any rate, that was how I saw it when I moved away from here for the first time. Back then, I was sixteen and couldn’t get away fast enough. It’s true that I chose to study music in high school out of interest, but the fact that my choice required me to move away from home and into student digs was definitely a plus. Holmedal and the administrative centre of Askvoll felt dull and narrow. I was fizzing with rebellion and the urge to explore, and though I’d found reasonably good outlets for this in secondary school by wearing men’s suits and overcoats rather than Adidas and Diesel, and opting for dips in frozen mountain lakes rather than running around a handball court, it was with a hearty Hasta la vista, baby that I put my birthplace behind me.

The town where I went to study, Sandane, was about three hours away from home and although cans of beers drunk may have outnumbered veggie stews eaten, I reckon I coped pretty well with freedom.

Had I left for good? I don’t believe I thought that far ahead either then or in the years that followed. I didn’t think about my life as a whole, only about the here and now. Rarely more than half a year into the future. And often much less.

It meant a tremendous amount to me to stand on my own two feet, to steer my own course and to be able to do exactly what I wanted. One Thursday morning, for example, I woke up in my student digs in Sandane and just knew it: today’s the day I’m hitch-hiking to Bergen. So that’s what I did. After tramping around the city playing the anonymous tourist for a few hours, I hopped on the night train and travelled onward to Oslo (train tickets were cheaper back then). The next night, it was the train to Trondheim, where I sneaked into Nidaros Cathedral as a choir was rehearsing Gregorian chants, accompanied by the organ. The music made the hairs rise on the back of the neck and the tears well up in my eyes, and reinforced the sense that absolutely no one knew where I was. It all made me feel so strong and wild and free. I hitched back to Sandane and went to school on Monday morning without telling a soul where I’d been.

After high school, I started to work for Young Friends of the Earth in Bergen. At last, I’d found the political environment I’d been searching for – one where it wasn’t unusual to boycott McDonald’s and Coca-Cola, discuss anarchist theory at parties, go around in T-shirts that declared your political affiliation rather than your favourite TV series, and, above all, where the personal was political and the aim was to live as far as possible in line with your beliefs.

The most important thing we had was our opinions, and whether we were squatting or running poster campaigns against an inhuman housing market or striking in protest against the war in Iraq or writing letters to the newspaper, all of it felt so creative and constructive: “To resist is not a last act of desperation but a first act of creation”, as someone once put it. And I have lived by that motto since and still try to do so today.

We built back then too. We went on exchanges to organic farms in Europe and helped out with the olive harvest, we went to villages of self-built mobile homes in Germany, and worked with radical farmers’ movements in South America.

We built for other people, because we ourselves were always on the move. Onward.

But now I’m going to stop.

Will I even be able to?

At any rate, I mustn’t believe that moving home will make me a different person. There must be room in my home for all my opinions.

And besides, it isn’t as if Holmedal has ever vanished from my life. No, the village has always represented some form or another of home. I used to stop in to visit Mum and Dad, my cabin in the mountains, and the paths I knew from before.

Now and then I’ve even lived here. Dad died of cancer when I was 24 and over the years that followed, I spent long periods in my childhood home, working shifts at the nursing home. It was nice: I enjoyed the job, which kept me active and felt meaningful for much more of the time than I would have expected.

It was no problem having to travel ten kilometres each way to and from work, or that I couldn’t drive. I cycled there and back with big saddlebags and a decent headlamp. In my spare time, I’d go running in the mountains and take a dip in Bakkevatnet Lake, and I found that the people I’d fearfully assumed would have the worst possible opinions about me – the rebel – were actually mostly curious or might not even have noticed my youthful rebellion at all, and judged me solely on the basis of the job I did. It was nice to have Mum close by again, too, just a few kilometres further into the fjord.

Even so, it wasn’t enough. I had barely formulated the idea of applying to train as a nurse before I became overcome by restlessness once more, and before I knew it, I found myself on an organic farm in Portugal, building treehouses in an olive tree and distilling liquor and trying to tame a wild stallion.

And so it’s gone, ever since, the months and the years, and I wouldn’t have missed any of it. Because every single choice made differently might have meant I wouldn’t have met Asle, wouldn’t have had the chance to sit here, now, on the threshold of what might turn out to be a weirdly crooked and tortuous circle that still makes most sense if it closes here, in this place, back at my own starting-point.

If I can just find peace. If I can just feel at home in the village so familiar to me in one way but in others, close to unknown.

I’m not aiming to be a prophet in my own country, exactly. But I probably do nurse the hope that I’ll find a place here in a local community, have a role to play here. It needn’t be major, so long as I can be useful –as the person I am.

I want to live in the countryside. To be perfectly honest, that’s also because I don’t want to bolster the statistics of people who vanish to the cities. I’ve lived in cities and thrived there. Oslo taught me downhill skiing, and in Gothenburg I drank way too much beer without a trace of guilt and went to Bohemian parties thrown by thespians. Cities have a lot to offer, but not enough. Because I can’t see the northern lights there, I can’t sling my rifle over my shoulder and tramp just a hundred metres into hunting terrain, I can’t catch the whiff of muckspreading in spring and feel proud in the knowledge that the food we eat was produced all around me.

Many people think it’s madness to live in a municipality without a casualty department, where, at the time of writing, there are only two local jobs advertised on the internet listings site and one of them will involve a commute. Well, maybe it is madness, and maybe it’s perfectly okay.

Still, ending up back in my home village certainly wasn’t the result of years of nostalgic yearning or thorough planning.

It was, quite simply, a rather quick decision. Earlier in the autumn when we bought the house, Asle was looking to set up a partnership with a traditional craftsman based in Fjaler municipality – on the other side of Dalsfjorden and a bit further in. By the time we realised this house was up for sale, the pair of them – Asle and the craftsman, Ove Losnegård – had already agreed to try collaborating. They didn’t know quite how it would work yet, nor did we know where we would be living in the future. Should Asle do a weekly commute, or should we find a place where we could live together closer to his new colleague? The idea of buying something together wasn’t new, and we’d even been to a few viewings – seen one abandoned smallholding on Grønenga island north of Florø, for example, and another high above Sognefjorden in Vik. Both went for well above the asking price and consequently well above what we could afford.

Trollefossvegen 23, on the other hand, was going for a price we could live with – and had plenty of features that we appreciated. The main house has a floor area of 120m2, distributed over two storeys, plus an unfinished cellar. Almost as appealing were the 170m2 of outbuildings, with everything from an almost fully equipped but as yet unused meat dryer to a log storehouse, a huge stone fireplace, a woodshed, a garage and a space that was just crying out to be converted into a carpentry workshop. For jacks of all trades like us, this is about as close as you can get to heaven in the form of real estate, I’d say. House, home, berry bushes and mossy lawn combined amounted to just under half an acre. And all this could be ours for 700,000 kroner. We jumped at the chance.

But surely at a price like that, the house must have been a wreck, totally uninhabitable or at least a complete renovation job, mustn’t it? Not remotely. An estate agent might have opted for phrases like “needs upgrading”, “few mod cons”, “fixer-upper” and the like, but the truth was that there was no practical reason why we couldn’t move into it just as it was.

The kitchen had a cooker with round hotplates but a fan-assisted oven, the dishwasher was a bit noisy but worked perfectly fine, the bathroom and toilet were waterproofed with underfloor heating, and the east-facing loft bedroom had a sloping roof and windows with a view of the full moon at bedtime at certain points in the month.

All we had to do was move in. And that’s what we did.

The first few months, the kitchen was our only living space and it was just about enough. I had an old bed base lying around, and although admittedly it was legless, we’d acquired three or four cubic metres of firewood along with the house, so I dug out four more or less straight birch logs, planed the ends flat and nailed them to the base, dumped a mattress on top along with masses of cushions, and voilà – we had a sofa. There was space for the little kitchen table over by the window and there was a wood burner in the room with a flue that ran up into the bedroom, making it ever so slightly warm up there by bedtime. We could live with that – but only for a while.

Because there was one thing in the house that *had* to be dealt with: the beams in the living-room ceiling, which also supported the floor of the room above it, were rotten. To be on the safe side, the previous owner had secured the western-facing loft room with two huge glue-laminated beams that shored up the house lengthwise. While that had secured the house, the fact that the beams ran across the floor, one on either side, made the room itself completely unusable.

That hadn’t been a problem for the people who owned the house before us. This particular room, the west-facing bedroom, if you like, had probably never been properly finished. The log walls are visible and only half of the flooring had been laid over the rotten and ready-to-replace joists.

But we wanted to make use of that room up there. A bedroom and a tiny little dormer room isn’t enough for us once we factor in all the children and grandchildren and family and friends, yours and mine alike, that we’ll want to have to stay.

So the first project we tackled was tearing down the living room ceiling.

At this point in the story, it’s important to mention that Asle is a carpenter by trade and resourceful by nature. He’s been his own boss for several decades, building houses and holiday cabins from the ground up, replacing roofs and windows, renovating bathrooms, building patios and who knows what-all else.

As for me, I want to do my bit and learn.

Although I grew up in the village here in Sogn og Fjordane county, I didn’t discover my practical side until I was grown up: first on a practical course in agriculture and then at a mountain cabin I inherited where I embarked on the project that eventually resulted in my book, *Handmade: Learning the Art of Chainsaw Mindfulness in a Norwegian Wood* – building a privy single-handed. It was a project I didn’t think I’d be able to achieve to start off with but which I managed in the end, although it took an awful lot of time and swearing. It’s a privy I still use today and appreciate all the more precisely because I made it myself.

“My bare hands have brought me home” I wrote back then, because we’d bought the house just as the book was being completed. And that’s exactly what I want to build on, now that I’ll be building myself a home, though not from scratch, of course. And I hope the house we’ve bought will stand at least as long as I live and well beyond. But there’s no doubt that one of the most important things about this home as far as I’m concerned is the space to create. It’s what we call a *grisleplass* in my dialect: a place where you can tinker away at things that won’t necessarily get done quickly but do involve constant progress. Most importantly of all, this is stuff you do for the sheer pleasure of it – be it sowing kale seeds in old egg cartons on the windowsill then planting them out in a tyre in the garden once the weather warms up, or replacing rotten panelling on the walls of your house or sewing bedroom curtains or mowing the lawn or turning over the compost or something else entirely.

I’ve bought less than half an acre of land and yet I foresee tasks enough to keep me occupied for several lifetimes. Perhaps the ultimate challenge will be to rein myself in. At any rate, there are challenges aplenty – for my head, for my hands and above all for the great overarching sense of being at home in a place.

I don’t believe I’m alone in this way of thinking, in wanting to shape my surroundings in ways that do not simply involve pulling out your credit card or hiring a craftsperson. I saw proof of that during the first year of Corona – the way we all started refurbishing when we had to work from home, how difficult it became to get hold of seed potatoes in spring 2020 – but I don’t need to start there. We Norwegians were already world champions at fixing up houses and holiday homes well before the pandemic.

We cannot, should not and will not do everything for ourselves. There are aspects of this makeover mania that are way out of control, such as the use of materials and adoption of solutions that aren’t designed to last or can’t be repaired, or the compulsion to follow trends that are replaced at ever-decreasing intervals.

Even so, having time, space and knowledge enough to shape your own surroundings should be a matter of course. Instead, it has become a thoroughly unusual way of life for many and an almost unachievable dream for even more.

Why – and how – has our society become like this? Just a few generations back, planting potatoes, keeping poultry and repairing the kitchen chair were things people did because it was useful (and necessary, if we go a few generations further back). The goal of success and luxury was to get way from this kind of tiring work, to enter a class and an existence where you could buy your way out of such obligations.

Now this reality has almost been turned on its head. In urban areas in particular, the waiting lists for allotments are years long, mountain pastures have been displaced by holiday homes for the ultra-rich and if a person did feel inclined to repair that broken kitchen chair, where in their thirty metre square apartment are they supposed to do it? Where are they supposed to keep the saw and glue – not to mention the workbench – the rest of the time?

I don’t think I’m alone, either, in discovering my practical side like this somewhere in the middle of my life. Far from it. Many of us aren’t in touch enough with our practical sides, not just in Norway but the Western world in general. Still, there are certainly plenty of us puttering away in our daily lives – just a little, just enough – and getting an enormous sense of pleasure, achievement, satisfaction, peace and meaning out of our small creative projects. Like chopping our own firewood, but using electric heaters to avoid 12-degree temperatures in the kitchen when we get up in the morning. Like opting for self-caught trout over a supermarket pizza but not bothering to make our own fish pie. Or liking to knit but also heading for the sales at H&M.

It’s all too easy to catastrophize. I’ve fallen into that trap myself – once, during a literary panel at the Literature House in Lillehammer, for example. My professional artisan interviewer and I talked ourselves into a corner where we made it sound as if woodwork was a totally forgotten subject in schools, and too few art and crafts teachers had technical skills, and no children growing up today were allowed to learn how to use a knife because it was too dangerous, and that meant they didn’t develop their practical side, and that’s why almost no one can do their own simple home repairs any more.

On the one hand this is true, but it is, at best, only half of the reality, and luckily we had a live audience there that day to remind us of it. A chap close to the back of the hall took the mic and told us that he knew a lot of people, but he didn’t think he knew anyone who didn’t have at least three different electric saws at home. Most people weren’t afraid of using them either, he thought – even people with an academic education dealt with practical chores around them, big and small, and helped each other out when necessary.

And he was absolutely right, of course. Tinkering about at home, as a hobby and everyday pursuit, is far from a dying art, even for my generation. But I still think an ever-widening and -deepening gulf is opening up: for those who know how to do it, changing the oil in their boat or the wheel bearings on their cars for themselves is something they take so much for granted that it doesn’t occur to them that not everyone knows how to do it. For those who don’t, the threshold for going somewhere and learning how to do it is becoming ever higher.

Again, I am lucky. I don’t need to go anywhere to learn. I can learn at home.

Because we’re planning to do the work on our house ourselves. How much it would end up being, we didn’t know at the outset and perhaps that was just as well. But for now, we’re bursting with industrious zeal and can’t wait to get started. The first thing we do is pull down the old ceiling – a messy job because it’s made of tiles, each one of which is covered in decades’ worth of dust.

Then we break and chop and saw the old beams, which are two inches wide and eight inches high and full of nails in all the most logical and illogical places. I’m already glad Asle doesn’t just have experience but tools too, because that massive load of equipment we bought with us, seemingly so excessive, was rapidly put to good use.

I don’t think I’m exaggerating when I say that we have 30 saws. Of ten different types. Many of them are handsaws, because it’s useful to have one of those in every place where you’re working. Still, some of them really ought to be chucked out and the fact that they haven’t been is probably only down to a combination of “handy to have it” and sheer laziness.

And then there are all the other types of saws: Asle has reciprocating saws, which are useful if, for example, you want to cut through nails when you’re tearing stuff down. We use the jigsaw to carve out intricate details, for example when we’re going to make a vertical moulding that will have to follow the curves of the log wall. If we need to start sawing in the middle of a board, like when we’re cutting out a piece for a window, we use the circular saw. I was truly terrified of it to start off with because if you don’t place it straight down and drive it straight ahead, it jumps all over the place. But nowadays, I’ve pretty much made friends with this tool, which is great for making long cuts the length of a board – if we don’t have a table saw to hand. For smaller details, the multi-cutter is the thing: it looks a bit like an angle grinder but has a sawblade instead of a grinding disc and it’s battery-powered.

To cut a board to length, perhaps with a particular angle that must match the angle of the next board at the point where they will join, we use a mitre saw. The chainsaw can be used for a lot more than just tree-felling in the forest: for indoor use, we have a natty little battery-powered model that starts up at the touch of a button and doesn’t give off any exhaust fumes.

All these gadgets take a bit of getting used to for a person who’s more accustomed to being able to fit all her worldly possessions in a car and found it a bit embarrassing to become part of the statistic proving that Norwegians are world champion renovators whose garages are so full of tools that there’s never any room for their cars. Norwegians spend close to 100 billion kroner a year fixing up their houses and holiday homes. For comparison, Norway’s total seafood exports in 2020 amounted to 105.7 billion kroner. So that’s a lot of money and a lot of wasted resources. The construction, running, maintenance and demolishing of buildings jointly account for around 40 per cent of all the resources a human being will use in the course of a lifetime. This figure tells us two things: that we need to think carefully about how much real estate we actually need; and that once we have bought ourselves a building, we need to take good care of it to ensure it doesn’t fall apart.

And then, it can be difficult to strike a balance between maintenance and renovation, necessary and not so necessary but very good to have. This balance is rather important to me: I want to have a house that’s nice to live in but I don’t want to end up stuffing it with things I don’t really need. I’ll have to weigh up every choice I make like this, and I hope I won’t get too tired of doing that.

One thing I do know: the best thing we can do for our house is maintain it. And we are particularly well-equipped to do that with all our tools – which aren’t just for own private use either. Asle uses them at work, and this means that a lot of other houses apart from ours benefit from them too. Tools and gadgets that get used aren’t a problem, and our saws are part of our self-sufficiency.

Once the ceiling is gone, our living room feels almost like a cathedral. It’s five or six metres up to the roof ridge.

We want to have big beams that are visible in the living-room below. But our living room is big, close to six metres wide and it’s impossible to get those kind of lengths in the dimensions we want at such short notice. We can’t just go into the forest, fell a tree and whack it up. The material needs enough time to dry properly and if no one in the vicinity has the materials in the right dimensions in stock either, there’s simply nothing we can do about it.

Other than think a bit laterally: the solution we come up with is to glue and screw two beams together and then cover them in beam cladding. With the aid of a spot of plaster and paint, we end up with the beams we wanted at last, although it takes time. Asle is the one responsible for cutting a precise 45-degree angle along the cladding boards, which we lay edge to edge as best we can along the beams, then I hammer in nails as straight and neatly as I can. But even hammering one simple nail isn’t always so easy: too far towards the edge and the board will split, but too far in isn’t any good either – and if you bash too hard, you’ll end up leaving hammer marks on the wood, which only become more visible with every coat of paint we apply,

This is our living room we’re working on, so we want to be precise. But our living room is neither a museum nor a painting. That’s why we allow ourselves to make the beams like this. We may not have achieved antiquarian accuracy even though we live in an old house, but it’s functional, thoroughly good quality and it looks lovely.

It turns out fine. Six inches of visible beams are solid and cool.

And with that, the work we need to do in the living room is complete. But do we feel as if we’re finished? Well, not entirely. Not remotely, in fact.

**The Wall that Wasn’t Where it Was Meant to Be**

Because as we stood there in the living room that stretched all the way up to the roof ridge and looked at the lovely old log walls up there, and then at heavy brownish-grey 1980s-era pine panelling down below, we got the urge to start tearing it down; to bring the cool old timber into the light of day, polishing forth its life and its rings, oiling it until it shone and gleamed. So we made a start on it, tearing down the pine panelling.

Behind the panelling, history reveals itself. On two of the walls in the living room, we immediately found our way back to the logs, the timber we wanted to reveal, but it was painted: a thick bluish-grey coat of linseed oil paint in exactly the same shade that pretty much everyone in the village who strips back to the timber walls discovers underneath.

Behind a third wall, however, there was no timber, only another layer of panelling, which was even older. Perhaps we should have smelt a rat then, but we’d come so far that we simply tore down this layer of panelling too – and found ourselves with more hole than log wall.

Our west-facing wall now has a little lead-glass window fairly high up in the centre. It wasn’t always there. Once there were two windows, one on either side of the one that’s there today, only bigger. After stripping away the panelling, all that is left re the holes where those windows once were – and they are stuffed with insulation not timber.

We scratch our heads. What the hell? This isn’t the plan. Should we fill the holes with timber? Should we put up fresh panelling? Are we going to have to bring out the plaster and wallpaper? No, we aren’t there yet; we haven’t even got to the point where we needed to have a plan for rebuilding, because right now we’re demolishing stuff, and there’s still more to pull down.

Things are snowballing, actually. We get ideas, get an urge to do something completely different. The existing living room is on the west side of the house, the kitchen on the east. Between these two rooms is a bedroom which you enter from a corridor on the northern side of the house. So to get from the kitchen to the living room, we have to walk along this corridor and open two doors. The room in between can become an extra living-room – and while we’re at it, mightn’t we just as well connect the main living room and the kitchen? Shall we knock down a few walls?

Yes, we shall, it seems, and with the help of a chainsaw and a laser spirit level, we soon have a big living room and a little living room that are neatly connected with the kitchen.

Our cathedral is growing, but now we turn our gaze downwards. Our floor is pretty wonky. Between the five metres from the outer wall to the internal wall where the chimney-place and fire wall stand, the floor slants down eight to nine centimetre. The fire wall is heavy and has become heavier over time because the old brick chimney has been reinforced with a steel flue on the inside and Leca stone on the outside. While we should be glad of this, because it means we can light a fire legally and safely, it has also proved too much for both the floor and the layer of beams and joists it rests upon. There’s probably no risk of collapse, and the beams and joists are perfectly visible in the cellar – which is tall enough to stand up in – so we could reinforce them separately. But perhaps it’s still easier to fix everything now, before covering the floor with carpets and sofas and pianos and the like.

So we pull up the floor. First the lino, with its thousands and thousands of tiny nails, then the most recent pine floor (which is probably at least a hundred years old), and then the old underfloor, which is pocked with holes from huge rivets and whose broad boards slant in such a way that you can tell they all came from the same tree – and all the way down to the beams and joists. Them we leave.

Now our cellar is in the living room and soon it’ll be Christmas – our first Christmas in our own house. It needs a Christmas tree, doesn’t it? My first Christmas tree since I moved away from home at the age of sixteen. And that Christmas tree must have a floor to stand on, mustn’t it?

It must.

We’re a bit busy. I’m working from home, so fortunately I can do some work on the house during the day in between writing sessions. In fact, it even does me good. I like writing, don’t get me wrong, but I’ll sit easier in my office chair if I’ve made active use of my body for a few hours first.

Asle, who has only just started his new job, must pretty much spend his days there, so all we have left is evenings and weekends. And it isn’t every afternoon you feel like digging around in dust and timber, especially Asle, who’s just spent the whole day doing precisely that. But we’re still new to the work and full of determination, and though it’s dark and cold outside, we manage to get three to four solid hours of work done inside almost every evening.

And now it’s time to build it all back up again.

[p. 167-170]

Hunting can be pretty tedious when you don’t see any animals. On this particular afternoon, I’d actually decided to give up and go home because I hadn’t seen hide or hair of anything resembling a red deer. I just felt like having a little sit-down in some marshland first. But all of a sudden, I realised that the yellowish-brown patch of grass I could see up on the mountainside at a distance of six to seven hundred metres as the crow flies was not grass but a red deer – a one-and-a-half-year old doe – precisely the kind of animal I’m allowed to shoot according to my hunting quota.

Yet my first thought was ‘Ah, just let her go her way’ – like all the other deer I’d met before. Because she was too far off, it would be getting dark in an hour and besides I didn’t know if I’d be able to ford the river that lay between us. I’m not up to this, I think.

Or am I? In an instant, hunting has become anything but tedious. Suddenly, a route between me and the deer seems to reveal itself to me: across the marshland, between the trees, behind a little stand of spruce, up a small heather-clad hillock. If I can get there, I’ll be within perfect shooting range before darkness falls. My pulse rate rises but not so much that it’s out of control. The wind direction is perfect for sneaking up on the animal and the distance between us isn’t really all that great.

It would be silly not to give it a try. I cross the river without any trouble, then drop my bag beside the stand of spruce so it’ll be easier for me to creep up onto the hillock I’ve picked out. My progress through the juniper bushes is far from silent but I’ll just have to trust that the soughing of the wind and the gurgle of the river will give me cover. I can no longer see the doe; I don’t know whether she’s still grazing on that little rock shelf over there, but I can see the hillock I’m aiming for. I take a break before heading up there, to catch my breath after the uphill hike and give my pulse a chance to slow down a bit – now I have to do this. Now I’m going to shoot my first red deer.

I creep up the hillock and we spot each other at the same time, me and the red deer. The doe is still where I saw her last, where she’s supposed to be. She tilts her head slightly and seems to have caught a glimpse of me. But I’m quicker than she is: By the time she’s raised her head to scout the terrain, I’ve already dropped down into the heather. She decides she was mistaken and carries on grazing. I creep onwards, keeping as low as possible. Now I’m lying comfortably on top of the hillock: a little rise beneath my chest allows me to position my rifle in the crook of my arm and provides solid support for my left arm. I get the deer in my sights, release the safety catch, line up the sights where I want them and think, this is it: I can’t wait too long otherwise I’ll lose my focus. This is when I’m meant to do it; my aim is good enough, this will go fine. I breathe in – and out – then fire.

Is it too much to say that life will never be the same again? I don’t know if I actually managed to think that thought in the moment. Yet even then it felt as if some weight was lifted off my shoulders when I reloaded, fairly sure that I’d fired a decent shot, although not absolutely certain. The doe ran three steps – nothing unusual in that I know, even when the shot is fatal – but then she falls among the juniper and I can’t see her any more. I head towards her at a gentle run, insofar as it’s possible to run through metre-high juniper brush and scree and streams – but I think I know where she is. And there, indeed, she lies: dead.

What did I feel right then? A whole lot of things. Relief. It worked. I did it. A bit sad for the doe, although no grief – and a sense of belonging besides. A strong and concrete sense that the totality of nature encompasses both me and the young doe that lies before me.

And yes, happiness too. I feel light and bright, feel like jumping and dancing with delight.

[p. 200-209]

**Home is Made Along the Way**

It was an 850-metre walk to my primary school and I knew every single centimetre of the way. I knew how many white lines there were along the roadside and I knew how many steps it took for me to walk along each line; I knew where the halfway point was, of course, and how far away from the school I could be when the bell rang and still arrive on time.

The only thing I didn’t understand was why there was a picnic area just over halfway there. It lay between the road and the fjord and was little more than a patch of gravel with a sign, a wooden bench and a litter bin. The picnic area itself wasn’t the problem, just the fact that it was here. Where I lived. Home. After all, picnic areas are for elsewhere, aren’t they? For all the unknown places. Why would anyone want to stop here?

It’s only now I’ve moved back home, some twenty years after moving out to my first-ever rented room, that I understand it. I realise now that the bowl-shaped valley visible to the north is downright beautiful. If I turn towards Dalsfjorden, south of the road, I can see that the fjord has something no other fjord does. I can’t put a finger on precisely what that something is, but it’s partly the fact that the fjord is both open and surrounded by rugged mountains; both inland and connected to the sea at its mouth. It may not be spectacular or unique, it may not be the world’s most beautiful fjord, but it’s more than good enough.

The fact that I see my childhood village with new eyes after moving back is hardly unique and maybe not even especially surprising. Yet it’s terribly important, because I hadn’t thought of myself as moving home to the same place I once moved away from: I was settling down to build myself a brand new, permanent home.

Our first year on Trollefossvegen has come to an end. Tussi has experienced her first snow, which did absolutely nothing to hinder her development – on the contrary. The dry powder quickly became an exciting new plaything. We’ll have to wait and see what she makes of the slush that will probably make its appearance sooner or later. But what a great life she’s living. She can come and go as she pleases, there’s always food in her dish, there are plenty of people around to pet or play with her on her own terms. It still gives me a warm feeling to see her sneak around the garden, absorbed in a leaf that trembles in the wind, or stalking a chicken. Her mere existence is one of the very best things about Trollefossvegen 23.

While Asle and I strap on our skis outside the door each afternoon then head off down the groomed tracks deep into the hilly terrain, the chickens and ducks have almost gone into hibernation. They are strictly indoor animals as long as the ground outside is white. But aided by a little daylight and a heat lamp when needed, the chickens are still laying eggs – to the enormous delight of us inhabitants of the main house

Because when we sit down to dinner now, it’s the rule rather than the exception that our own household produced at least one component of the meal. Generally more than one. The potatoes are coping nicely with being stored in apple crates in the basement. The freezer is full of venison, and the redcurrant jelly – which thickened in the end – provides the perfect accompaniment. We’ve caught trout in Bakkevatnet and picked chanterelles in a little pine forest we found on the other side of the river. The meat for our Christmas meal of *pinnekjøt* – dry-cured ribs of lamb – comes from an animal we bought from Peder in Tveit a little way up the road, which we hung to dry in the outbuilding. We’ve picked juniper berries in the fields, and harvested and dried all the remaining herbs. We now have a small jar of oregano, a little thyme and enough mint for at least a dozen cups of tea.

And because there won’t be all that many cups, each one of them is the source of a very particular joy. Indeed, I think I can call it disproportionately large. My mint is good but it isn’t *that* much better than any other mint – not enough to explain my joy.

Where does this feeling come from? Is it possible to trace it back to instinct, just like the joy of hunting? I do know I’m not the only one to feel it – given all the food bloggers and glossy magazines and TV programmes that talk about the value of knowing the story behind your food, how good jam tastes when you picked the berries yourself, or the value of knowing how potatoes are grown.

The story of our food is about so much more than just eating our fill. Food is Christmas breakfasts and wedding receptions and endless ice cream on Constitution Day and picking blueberries by hand; and Norwegian strawberries are the definitive proof that summer has come. Food is and always has been culture and identity and togetherness and community. And we don’t experience all this in the same way if we buy everything we eat at the supermarket. The steady rise in the number of people who want to hunt, to become involved in community-supported agriculture via shared farms, to take sauce courses run by the local women’s institute or produce traditional beer using local yeast cultures suggests that we have a desire to become more than mere consumers of our culinary culture. We want to take part in it.

And yet I’m not sure about this question of instinct. I believe we can be certain that people already felt pride in what they cultivated, harvested and produced back in the days when they were entirely reliant on it. But did they feel this pride in the same way – not to mention to the same degree – that people do now?

Because something has undoubtedly shifted. Once upon a time, self-sufficiency was a necessity for those who had the least, and the higher up the social ladder you were, the more you could pay others to produce food for you; but now the roles seem almost reversed. Having the opportunity, space and time to grow things yourself has become an upper-class phenomenon – at least in and around the cities where ever more of us live. Hunting costs several thousand kroner per animal, there are years-long waiting lists for the city allotments that are open to all, and the closer to home your food is produced, the more it tends to cost in the stores. The term “locally sourced” has become a pretext for supermarket chains to push up their prices.

In the age of Covid, Norway has witnessed a mass exodus from the cities to the outlying countryside. Locked-down towns lack appeal and this has brought the benefits of rural life to the fore.

But will this make rural communities more attractive over the long term? That remains to be seen. All we can do is to carry on living as we do out here, fighting for what we have and demanding what we lack, because we’re just perfectly ordinary people living our lives to the best of our ability – and we’d be happy to welcome more people who want to live in the same surroundings as us. While we pay less per square metre for property, the costs of electricity and running a car are higher – but anyway the overall calculation is about more than just numbers.

Here in Bakke, we were lucky enough to buy our property at a price that didn’t leave us house-poor. The purchase price alone ensured that we could take out a mortgage that we can still afford to service even if we have a few days off each month to hunt, take advantage of a good sailing wind or visit grandchildren in Kristiansand.

But of course the mortgage was just the starting point. We could easily have spent a few million kroner on refurbishing if we’d wanted to. But luckily we both agreed that the kitchen is functional enough for us even though the cupboard doors are ugly and the flooring even worse. The bathroom has held up for twenty-five years, it’ll hold up for a few years more. Forced to choose between what home makeover programmes on TV like to call ‘modern standards’ and a mortgage that we can live with – and still sleep at night – we’ve had no difficulty choosing the latter.

That’s what gives us time to pick cloudberries and strip our redcurrant bushes to the very last berry, and go hunting and build our own bookcases in the living room and make hedges out of branches we’ve clipped then woven between the tree trunks that already line the roadside. Not by losing sleep and running ourselves ragged with this or that, but by prioritising the time to make things ourselves rather than the money that would enable us to buy what other people have made.

In that respect, we’re more or less on the same page, Asle and I. Fortunately, after a year in the same house, we’re both still keen to head in the same direction. Broadly speaking, we’re in agreement even though we can’t help arguing about the billions of details we don’t see eye to eye on, and neither of us seems able to give up our need to be right. We compete all time and far too much, and probably always will. We’ll carry on bickering and being mean to each other now and then. But I hope – and believe – this is something we’ll be able to live with, because we also have so much that is good; everything we have achieved this year is a source of truly great joy.

That aside, one of the most important things I’ve done over this past year is try to shake off the need to be perfect. You could almost say it’s become a cause: I’m working hard to accept that I won’t entirely finish everything I aim to do. Some mouldings will remain unpainted. I refuse to have a weed-free flowerbed or an outbuilding without any mess; to buy a mini-greenhouse at the home improvement store or outdoor furniture in synthetic wicker from the garden centre. I’d rather sit on a cushion on the stone steps.

I want to have my own half-finished home, where most things are good enough because we’ve made them as well as we’re able to. A place where few things are flat-pack, most are built from scratch and we’re rarely if ever too busy to stop for a chat with our neighbours. Here, dreams must become reality bit by bit, which means they can often seem utterly beyond our reach – and on days like that, life can feel tough until we manage to remind ourselves that even though progress is slow, it’s always heading in the right direction. No matter what we do, we’re doing something for the better.

Some days, we have to make do with remembering to put out the paper-recycling bin and changing the straw in the chicken coop, because these kinds of maintenance jobs are always there and are just as important as all the innovations, although they’re much more tedious. Some days things can even go backwards, like the time we moved the washing machine and the floor drain backed up, flooding the whole laundry room. And that was seriously crappy. The one thing I hate most in the world is having to re-do a chore I’ve already crossed off my list.

But then there are days when you manage to paint half the outbuilding in one go, when the sunflowers blossom and the fish traps are overflowing with enormous male crabs, claws packed with meat, and Tussi settles on my chest the second I lie down on the sofa for the evening. Her deep, measured breathing helps slow the rhythm of my own, and when my nose and hands are buried in that soft, warm fur, the outside world simply vanishes. With Tussi, I’m in the here and now. One step forward two steps back. Then three steps forward and straight ahead. My home will always be in movement. Moving on the spot.

Above all, coming back home is about so much more than I’d envisaged. I looked forward the refurbishing, and I’ve done it; I was excited about my hometown but it hasn’t made much of itself, one way or another. And I think that’s fine: I’ll get acquainted with it slowly and a little at a time.

I won’t suddenly turn into the world’s calmest and most balanced person just because I’ve become a homeowner and have spent most of the past year in one place. But I do think I’ve noticed that my energy is in the process of being re-directed. Instead of approaching every new day as a blank page, I’m using more of my brainpower on planning for better results in the kitchen garden next year – not to mention our old outbuilding. As the main house comes closer to being the way we want it, we’ll start to work on making the outbuilding our own too: This 170-square-metre playground will become – among other things – a carpentry workshop, a tannery and a scullery.

It takes a bit of time to settle into a place. We still haven’t found the best spot for an outdoor coffee, for example. We move around. In the afternoon, if the sun’s shining, there’s a nice bit of decking below the rhododendron. We’ve gone so far as to put down some stone paving, and this is where we tend to place our two garden chairs.

But sometimes, if the north wind is a bit too brisk, it’s better to sit by the southern wall, where there’s a corner between the extension to the bathroom and the kitchen. And if it’s raining, we simply have to sit in the woodshed or beneath the eaves by the old stone fireplace – a spot we discovered rather late, especially considering how cosy it is. The fireplace is enormous and was probably once used to smoke fish, possibly meat too, and it has a huge baking oven on one side. The floor is paved and on the other side is the old log storehouse that is attached to our outbuilding. It’s still full of junk and will probably remain so a little beyond the immediate future.

But the door can be shut and we can place a table and chairs in front of the fireplace, then light a fire and grill sausages. It’s a nice place to eat crab too because, since we’re eating outside, we don’t need to worry about how much mess we make when we crush the claws with the back of a spoon. And maybe we don’t need a special place to drink coffee anyway, because we’re both a bit scatter-brained, so it probably helps to move around a bit in this half-finished palace of ours – our half-acre of land with its two aging buildings, with neighbours around us, and mountains and a fjord and a cabin. At any rate, I can’t complain that this life is monotonous or that I have too few opportunities just because I’ve settled down at the same address.

Because the challenge is not, of course, finding something to do. It never has been. The challenge is to achieve everything I dream of, or at least enough of what I dream of to feel content; I’m working on balancing those two ideas. Think how much of what I once dreamed of I’ve already gained just by daring to settle down somewhere. Now I have a wheelbarrow and a wood-burning stove in the kitchen and woodpiles enough to feed several years’ worth of fires. All this I’ve achieved because I dared to opt for long horizons. Dared to settle down. Here. Now. And tomorrow.