

Sample Translation

Are Kalvø

Only Country Folk Long for Home

A Comedian's Quest to Bridge the Town-Country Divide

Author: Are Kalvø

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About the author:

Are Kalvø is one of Norway's leading comedians and satire makers. He's been doing stand-up for over twenty five years. He's also made musicals, revues, an opera and written twelve books about different themes such as religion, politics, football, vacationing and time usage. His book "The Hiking Book from Hell" became a huge best seller with more than 100 000 sold copies in Norway, it has been translated into twelve languages.

About the book:

Once and for all: Which is best – town or country? For as long as Are Kalvø has lived, people have been arguing about town and country. Other arguments get settled. But not this one.

The time has come to put this conflict behind us and channel our energies into solving the world's big problems instead. Are Kalvø is ready to sacrifice himself for the cause. He'll spend one month in Norway's smallest municipality and another month in Europe's biggest city. Then he'll compare the two and establish once and for all: Which is best – town or country? If that doesn't work, he'll try and build a bridge.

[p. 5-6]

Prologue from a medium-sized town and a fairly small place in Western Norway

Haugesund, a medium-sized town in Western Norway, winter 2023

We're on our way from bus to boat. It's a Sunday afternoon so we have the town pretty much to ourselves. It's surprisingly warm for February. By which, I mean it's a few degrees above freezing. At least it's sunny though. Sunny and downhill, so we're perfectly okay walking even though we have two enormous suitcases, a backpack apiece containing as much as the suitcases, plus a handbag and a plastic bag.

Just as we think we're getting close to the sea, we come across a pub that seems to be open. We look at each other, then our watches, and realise we actually have time for a quick pub stop before abandoning civilisation for good.

Like all other pubs that are open on Sunday afternoons in medium-sized Norwegian towns, this one looks old and shabby. And like all other old and shabby pubs, this one also has an entryway consisting almost exclusively of superfluous steps, narrow corridors, and unexpected doorsills. So it takes a while to manoeuvre ourselves and all our baggage into the pub itself – which is, by the way, full of ancient artifacts that really belong on board a ship and which we'd rather not knock over and destroy. Once we've finally managed to deposit all our baggage in a heap in the middle of the room without causing too much damage, and once I've retrieved the sunglasses I lost along the way, we give each other a satisfied nod and turn around to walk to the bar. That's when we notice that everyone in the pub is looking at us. All five of them. They've lost any interest in the World Ski

Championships playing soundlessly on the wall-mounted TV. The regulars look at us for a long time; they look especially hard at all our baggage.

“You moving in?” asks one of them.

We laugh.

“We’re going to Utsira.”

Long pause.

“Utsira?”

“Yes.”

The regular looks at all our baggage again.

“Planning on spending a fair bit of time there, are you?”

“We’ll be there for a month.”

The regular drains his pint.

“By choice?”

[p. 10-12]

And you are from...?

A few months before all this, in December, I'm standing at a train station in the centre of Lillehammer. To the extent that anyone in the outside world has even heard of Lillehammer, it's because the Winter Olympics were held here in 1994. For some reason. During those Olympic weeks in 1994, Lillehammer became an almost parodic version of a Scandinavian winter idyll. It was cold, it was snowy, it had wooden houses. The streets were full of people in party mood wearing old-fashioned garb and strange headgear.

On this particular December evening around thirty years later, Lillehammer is exactly the same. Apart from the bit about people in party mood. They've clearly gone elsewhere. Indoors, probably. With good reason. Like I said, it's cold and snowy. And when it's cold here, it's *really* cold. And slippery too.

I'm the only person waiting for the train. Which is delayed.

That's why it's such a joy to finally board the train this evening. It's warm and full of people. Not packed full, not annoyingly full. Sufficiently full. Full enough that *one* irritating person watching a movie with the sound up doesn't really bother me because there are enough other, nicer sounds in the carriage to drown him out. Laughter, gentle snoring, telephone calls that are interesting to eavesdrop on, a wise-cracking conductor ("You couldn't work out how to buy a ticket? Well, you see, the last app worked so well that we decided to design a new one that no one could make head or tail of.)."

Best of all, the train isn't too full: I'll still be certain to find a spot in the restaurant car. I'm very fond of restaurant cars on trains. One of the many things that make me happy about restaurant cars is that you get a tiny little anti-slip mat to put under your glass when

you order a drink. It's smart, of course, maybe even quite necessary. But above all, it's downright beautiful that someone dreamed up the idea and made it happen.

I sit down in a corner of the restaurant car with my anti-slip mat. I half-heartedly scan a new book – one of those novels that tries to make a single person's life line up with the entire history of Europe. It's a bit much right now, so I put the book down. I feel calm descend. It'll soon be Christmas. I'm more or less done with work for the year and, in a small way, this evening is the start of my holidays.

There are five other people in the restaurant car. They're sitting crammed around a table where there's only really room for four. They're laughing a lot. They're drinking a lot. They're talking about hunting, fishing and cars. Not topics I discuss often or with any great degree of knowledge and credibility, but I smile to myself a bit as I follow their conversations. There's a nice vibe in the car. I like a nice vibe.

Somehow or another, we end up chatting. I'm not sure how it happens. Maybe they simply noticed I was sitting there smiling at them.

They're from a fairly small place a bit further north along this train route. All of them work for the same auto repair shop and they're on their way to Oslo, where they'll spend a night at a hotel before setting off the next morning on a two-day Christmas party aboard the Germany ferry, which goes back and forth between Oslo and Kiel.

"Sounds like you'll be having a quiet time of it, then," I say. I'm the king of the ice-breaking one-liners when I put my mind to it. They laugh their heads off, tell me that this trip is a tradition, and of course they follow up with tales of previous Christmas breaks, where they've had anything but a quiet time of it.

I grew up in a village roughly the same size as their own, so we start there. The conversation's flowing nicely. We joke about various small-town phenomena. I've been to

their hometown a few times so I tell them what I remember about it, and then they tell me more about it themselves. We end up talking about the one and only celebrity who comes from their village. He may be the only one but he *is* a really big celebrity, who often talks about coming from precisely this place. My new buddies believe they have proof that the celebrity actually grew up on a farm that lies a hair's breadth over the other side of the border with the neighbouring village. In other words the only celebrity in the village isn't actually from the village.

"It must *never* come out," one of them says. And we have a good laugh.

All in all, we laugh a lot. I love these kinds of conversations. I love these kinds of chance meetings. I love trains. I love the run-up to Christmas, yes even that. In fact, there's something about precisely these kinds of people, who really love partying – in this case for 72 hours on the trot. If this train trip lasts long enough, I'm sure that I, too, can learn to love hunting, fishing and cars. We toast each other. We tell jokes.

"So you live in Oslo, do you?" says one of the mechanics.

Oh no, I think. Just when we were having such a nice time.

[13-14]

If you travel even a short way out of the largest cities, you'll soon notice how many of the jokes are about out-of-touch city-dwellers. Meanwhile, hardcore urbanites in safe surroundings and in the company of likeminded souls tend to joke that the country is where you'll find the true elites, the people who feel better and more authentic than everyone else just because they chop down trees and talk in dialect. And a lot of city folk can get genuinely aggrieved and start to mutter about "inferiority complexes" when people in other parts of the country think it's fun to call Norway's capital the Oslo village. Or when people in more weather-ravaged parts of northern Norway laugh their heads off over catastrophising news items about the total collapse of traffic in the capital following a spot of sleet. And it happens again and again, year after year, this very same thing. And one of the most irritating things about the situation is that I – who grew up in the country and live in the city – catch myself wanting or needing to defend *both* town and country against attack. It's hardly necessary. I imagine both town and country will get by perfectly well without my defence. But I do it all the same. And I'm getting a bit fed up with it.

[23-30]

I get off the train on this cold pre-Christmas evening with a spring in my step. It isn't often I say that kind of thing about myself. But this time, I actually would go that far. I had a spring in my step. I think people could tell that something had happened here: this was a man with a mission. A mission and a spring in his step.

My plan was already taking shape as I made my way home from the station that evening. The plan to put an end to the town-country conflict once and for all. The time has come. This constant strife is obscuring the truly great problems in the world. And my train journey showed me that it *is* possible. We actually managed to get through a town vs country conversation as friends – five drunk car mechanics from the country and a cultural worker from the capital. It's actually of the hardest things six grown people can do. Is it surprising I felt elated?

Something must be done. And I'm probably the one who has to do it. Why not? I mean, I have a foot in both camps. I grew up in the country and I live in the city. I'm a metropolis-lover who writes Nynorsk Norwegian and speaks in dialect. I can understand and speak to both sides. Maybe even like both sides. I'm just the man for the job! I think. Perhaps I even say it out loud, just before taking an extra-long stride to avoid a little hump of ice.

There you have it, I say to myself as I gaze at the icy hump: we're close to nature even in the midst of the city. Even here, we're at the mercy of nature. And I also think: Someone really ought to do something about this very slippery pavement, which must be a genuine hazard for people who aren't so steady on their pins, but because I live in a fairly big city, I

have no idea exactly *which* someone is supposed to sort it out. Whereas if I lived in a small village, I'd know that it's a chap called Rune. For example.

Thoughts like this come at me from all sides, and my ideas grow clearer and clearer, and better and better with every step; and the idea has become utterly and irresistibly brilliant by the time I come home, stand in front of my beloved, throw out my arms and declare, a little too loudly:

"I'm going to build a bridge!"

My beloved looks at me.

"I see there was a bar on the train."

"Yes. And those little anti-slip mats. Aren't they *great*? But that isn't the point. I'm going to build a bridge."

"Well, that's nice. And where will the bridge be?"

"I'm going to build a bridge between town and country."

"Hasn't that been tried before?"

"Yes, but not by me."

"What happened?"

She nods at my wet and muddy right thigh.

"I slipped on a patch of ice."

"Right."

"Listen to this! How about we spend a while living in a small village and a while living in a big city, then compare them and establish once and for all which is best."

"Is that how you're planning to build bridges?"

"We'll find out which is best in different areas. I'm guessing that the city's best at some things and the country at others, but we'll get it all down on paper. Do it systematically."

Make a form. That way people will have something to refer to. Like a kind of checklist. An alternative to bickering. Something designed by a person who's actually taken the trouble to try both things. Everyone who's in a position to do it really ought to try living differently than they usually do. And we are in that position. So we should do it – for society. If us Norwegians, who live pretty similar lives in a pretty similar country, can't stop bickering about this, what will become of the rest of the world?"

"You really mean it?"

"I really mean it. We'll start by looking at the lives of people who live only slightly differently from us, who live right around the corner, and then we can head further afield and try to understand people who live totally different lives in totally different places. It will be a circle of understanding!"

"A circle of understanding?"

"Something along those lines."

"So are you planning to compare Stranda and Oslo?"

Stranda's the village where I grew up, by the way.

"No, no, no! That's far too close to home. And it doesn't cost enough. We have to take far more drastic action. My idea – bear with me! – is that we spend some time in Europe's smallest municipality and some time in Europe's biggest municipality."

"First off, why do you keep saying we?"

"Well, you'll have to come along of course."

"You know I have a job."

"That's part of what we have to try out. What's it like working from home in the country? I mean, nowadays you can work anywhere."

"Not everyone can."

“No. But people like us can.”

There are a lot of reasons why she has to come along. First, because it'll be much nicer, of course. But an idea like this will also require us to come into contact with people and she's much better at that than me. I quite like my own company and, left to myself in some remote spot, I'd be liable to end up reading books and gazing out to sea for weeks on end, and that wouldn't leave me any the wiser about country life. Plus she's much more restless than me. Restlessness sparks initiative. Or makes life in a really small place unbearably tedious. Both outcomes will be good for the project.

“I need you,” I said. “You have to be my Contact Seeker.”

She's on board now.

“And another thing: Europe's biggest and smallest municipalities? Do all European countries have municipalities?”

She has a point here, of course. That business about Europe's biggest and smallest municipalities sounded great in my head while I strode along with a spring in my step on a slippery sidewalk. But it isn't all that easy to work out which administrative entities are equivalent to municipalities in different countries and different languages – language is messy that way. In Danish, for example, the word they use for hamlets is the same as the one we Norwegians use for towns, and heaven knows where villages fit in. In France, they have entities with a name that sounds like the word we Norwegians use for municipalities – in fact they have thirty-five thousand of them – but some have fewer than ten inhabitants. that just isn't serious. Ten inhabitants isn't a municipality, it's an extended family.

After giving it some thought and spending a few days on further research, I suggest a revised plan:

“Okay. Norway’s smallest municipality. Everything in Norway is small, isn’t it – that’s what we’ve always been told; so Norway’s smallest municipality must be small enough. And Europe’s biggest city. You and me. An adventure. As a service to society.”

“What is Norway’s smallest municipality?”

“Utsira is Norway’s smallest by population.”

“Yeah, Utsira does sound small. How many people live there?”

“Roughly two hundred. And it’s an island. Without a road link to the mainland.”

“And how long do you think we should spend there? Six months or so?”

“*Six months? Are you sick in the head?*”

I was thinking a month. But in February, say. A time of the year when Norway isn’t a particularly fun place. When there’ll be a few forces of nature to be exposed to. When there isn’t too much danger of tourists. A month when, quite simply, nothing very much will be happening. On an island it’s hard to escape from.

Ferries run to and from the mainland a few times a day. Except when it’s too windy. When that happens, you’re stuck. A pretty special rapport develops in places like that, I reckon. A rapport I will understand and like because I come from a Western Norwegian village, although admittedly it’s a long time since I lived there.

“You do realise you’re not going to survive even a week in such a small place, don’t you?”

“What do you mean? Have you forgotten I’m from a village?”

“Hardly – you talk about it all the time. But you haven’t lived in a village for thirty-five years.”

I laugh my head off. Then I think it over and realise it's actually true. It really *is* that long ago.

"Okay. But I know country folk. I have the experience. I have the background. I understand this life. I understand their bluff humour, all the jokes about city folk who are scared of getting their shoes dirty. It's in my blood! I grew up on a farm! I can milk cows!"

"Can you really?"

"Well, maybe not. But I know what a cow is. And I know other people who can milk cows."

"Do you really?"

I ponder that.

"Well you know what they say. All country folk long for home."

"Who says that?"

"I don't know. Someone."

"You aren't a peasant. And you've never longed for home."

When I talk to my buddies about my plan, it turns out that a lot of them are also sceptical about whether I can be viewed as a man who understands rural life. Specifically, here's a sample of the things people have said to me in these conversations. And these are some of my best buddies, by the way.

"You wouldn't survive a week in a small village."

"But you're addicted to cortado."

"You're probably the most urban person I know."

"You don't have a clue about rural life."

“Ha ha ha ha ha!”

This last was the response I got from a friend when I said I could easily live in a place with a few hundred inhabitants and blend in with the local community. Are they right? Is that how I’m perceived? Is that the way I am? Have I lost touch with my inner peasant?

No. they don’t know me, not really; they’ve never been with me when I travel around the country, partying and chatting with country folk into the early hours.

All the more reason why this is a good idea. By pursuing this plan I’ll show everyone that even I – who am apparently seen as a body-and-soul convert to urban life – even I have no difficulty living and thriving in a really tiny place. People exaggerate how big the differences are. That’s what this is all about. I’m going to help people get a grip.

Even though it means sacrificing myself. And spending a month on Utsira. And a month in Europe’s biggest city.

“What *is* Europe’s biggest city,” asks the Contact Seeker.

“Isn’t it London?”

“Let me check.”

“I’m sure it’s London. There’s no point checking.”

“It says here it’s Moscow.”

“We’re not going to Moscow. You must realise that. It’s London.”

“It says here it’s Paris.”

“Is Paris *that* big?”

“It says here it’s London.”

“Exactly.”

“It says different things in different places.”

“I think London’s biggest.”

“It looks as if it depends whether you count Greater London or Greater Paris or just the city.”

“Right. Let’s cut to the chase. London.”

“Hang on. Istanbul is the biggest.”

“We’re not going to Istanbul.”

“Why not?”

“It just won’t work if we go to a place where we can’t speak the language. If we do that, the differences we find will be down to cultural contrasts and language barriers. This book is supposed to be about big or small. Town or country. Besides, part of Istanbul isn’t even in Europe.”

“What about Paris? I know a bit of French.”

“But I don’t know any French.”

“Ah, I get it. So what you mean is we’re going to travel to the biggest city in Europe where they speak English.”

“Yes. Or Norwegian. Or German. I speak a bit of German. Though not enough maybe, now that I think about it.”

“So it’s London then?”

“I guess it’s London.”

We have a plan. We’re going to expose ourselves to the best and worst that big and small municipalities have to offer. And the main point, the real test: Utsira in February. Or February/March to be strictly honest. We have tickets for a concert at Oslo Spektrum in late

February, but the day after that we can head off to an island for a month. If we cope okay with that – maybe even like it – the bridge-building can commence.

“I’ve made a SEMFF form as well,” I say.

“You’ve made a what now?”

“A SEMFF.”

I hand her the sheet of paper with the form I’ve designed so we’ll have something to refer to when we’re comparing life in town and country. This form is an attempt to define what a good life is, so we’ll be able to fill out the different experiences from town and country along the way.

Quite a lot of people have thought about the good life before me. After scouring the internet I’ve found that it’s teeming with lists of what makes for a good life; lists written by everyone from the UN and the Mental Health Council to psychologists, business coaches, and influencers. And almost all the thoughts that have ever been thought boil down to five words and concepts:

SECURITY (health and safety if you like): You’re happy and healthy and safe, mentally, physically and materially.

EXPERIENCES. You can do stuff you enjoy.

MEANING. You’re part of something bigger, and are both able and allowed to contribute to this bigger thing.

FOLK. You have access to great people who wish you well.

FREEDOM. You can live life the way you want to.

SEMFF – see?

[81-91]

Day 1 in London

The day of sourdough, foxes and doctor

If there isn't a restaurant car on your train, you have to look for something else to enjoy.

When I take trains in England, it makes me happy just to see the names of the stations. In

fact, I can even lift my mood by reading British rail routes. British placenames in general make me happy. Especially the names consisting of more than one word. They're so nice.

They dance. And they all sound like something other than what they are. Some sound like

legal firms. Some like expensive interior designers. Some like jokes. Some like descriptions of

a violent episode. Some like poems. Some like ancient novels about aristocrats who are

struggling to express their emotions. Some sound like pubs, probably because they're

named after pubs. And some simply sound like the nickname of some exceedingly rich man.

Elephant & Castle

Langwith-Whaley Thorns

Ansdell & Fairhaven

Walton-on-the-Naze

Sandal and Agbrigg

Ascott-under-Wychwood

Ramsgreave and Wilpshire

Newton-on-Ayr

Harrow-on-the-hill

Burnham-on-Crouch

Grange-over-Sands

Berwick-upon-Tweed

Leigh on Sea

Burley-in-Wharfedale

There's a lot to be said about this. But I'm sure we can all agree on one thing: this is next-level stuff."

Barking Riverside

Falls of Cruachan

Stoke d'Abernon

Ashton-under-Lyne

Fearful-upon-Heights

Clapton-on-Hold

Grumpy-on-Drugs

Disney-on-Ice

All right, so three or four of the last ones were names I made up on the train. But only three of four – honest.

Anyway, we won't be going to any of these places. We are going to one carefully selected place, and now we are there.

Since the point of the London stay is to really savour the contrasts with itty-bitty Utsira, which doesn't even have a road link to the mainland, it's important for us to stay in a neighbourhood with as many as possible of the things that irritate people about big cities,

and about self-satisfied, out-of-touch capital-dwellers. We need to go to a place with hipsters, a place where there are plenty of people with clean hands and kooky clothes, where more people work with theory and culture than with their hands; to a neighbourhood where few people have ever slaughtered anything and many don't drive cars, and people look as if they have endless amounts of time to do nothing but sit around in public reading or talking.

But where is that place, right now?

I asked friends and acquaintances about this. I scoured my contacts list for people who are connoisseurs of London, who live there, have lived there, or have just spent a lot of time there. And I asked: Where should we stay?

The first one I asked instantly answered "Shoreditch."

The second answered: "Anywhere but Shoreditch."

And there, in a nutshell, you have one of the most irritating things about big cities: the constant competition about what's big *right now*, and the clamouring for attention by everyone involved in the competition, all of them desperate to show that they're more au fait than anyone else with what's big *right now*. And it is most certainly not what was big *just now*. Anyone who's interested in identifying the next big thing is also so interested in being far ahead of the game that they'll often declare neighbourhoods to be the next big thing before they actually are, and before the people who live there realize they're cool.

Every year, *Time Out* magazine ranks the world's coolest neighbourhoods. Oftentimes, the neighbourhood that tops the list one year won't even make the list the following year. That's how fast things move.

Once, years ago, I went on a lads' trip to Warsaw. One of our group works for a magazine that's always writing about the next big thing. He told us about a district in

Warsaw that everyone was talking about that was supposed to be absolutely the coolest place in Europe at that precise moment. When we arrived in the Polish capital, no one we spoke to had even heard of it. And when we eventually found a cab driver who thought he knew the neighbourhood, he refused to drive us there.

“You don’t want to go there,” he said.

And just recently I received a newsletter from this magazine my friend works for informing me that they’ve published an article about the new big trends in 2024. And we’re not just talking neighbourhoods in mega-cities by the way. We’re talking about life in general. According to this article, the big new trends in 2024 are side partings, a good night’s sleep, and the evening news.

Sometimes, I wonder whether they’re just making stuff up.

When we city-dwellers meet other people living in the same city and ask them where in the city they live, it isn’t because we’re damn fine people who are keen to show we’re interested in others. It’s because if we know what neighbourhood you live in, there’s so much else we won’t have to bother asking. The neighbourhood you live in tells us almost everything we need to know. And how you say the name of your neighbourhood is very telling too – whether you pronounce it with pride or mutter it apologetically, or say it with a grimace, or add a “but I’m only renting, of course.” All this tells us so much about what kind of person you are, what kind of person you want to be and – in many cases – how much money your parents have.

It's often shocking how different the neighbourhoods in a single city can be, even when they're right next-door to each other. People talk differently, live differently, dress differently, and are interested in different things. And it can also be shocking just how much the stereotypes about different neighbourhoods hold true. I once had some business in one

of Oslo's oldest and richest neighbourhoods, famous for its inherited wealth – a part of the city I almost never visit. When I arrived at the enormous house on the hill, I was met by a tanned man wearing plaid trousers, a cravat and wire-framed spectacles. He raised an eyebrow, gave a little nod and said, through clenched teeth: "Well, hello there!"

The first thing I thought, and I hope I didn't say it out loud, was: Do you really exist?

He looked 100% like something out of a skit. He looked as if he had dressed up as the stereotype of a man from this neighbourhood. He spoke like something out of a comedy sketch. Mostly about his holiday homes – note the plural – and his son, who was a skilled mountaineer and spent a lot of time in the Alps. The whole time, I kept waiting for the punchline, for my buddies to leap out of one of the carports and tell me that the whole thing was being filmed and would be shown on a big screen at my fiftieth birthday party. But no. This was what he was like, for real. I've rarely felt further from home. And I was only ten minutes from my house.

That's why it's quite important where in the city we stay when we go to London. And that's why I work my way through online lists of the best/coolest/nicest neighbourhoods in London – and there are a lot of these lists. This is what I do as my London-savvy pals continue to bicker about what *the* big thing is right now. Some say Peckham. Others think that people have been pushing Peckham as the next big thing for so long that we have to accept that it just isn't going to happen. Hackney Wick was mentioned by several people, a name I remembered from some of the lists where I also saw Walthamstow, a place that some of my contacts named and others just laughed at. Some people think Hackney Wick is *too* hipsterish, so much so that it's almost impossible to live there. We could go on and on.

And we do go on and on. Until someone comes in from the left field with Bermondsey. Bermondsey topped one of the lists I've seen, but that one was four or five years old. I've

never heard of Bermondsey, I have to admit. Our contact says it's a bit more like a place for grown-up hipsters. Maybe that means the coolness won't be quite as fleeting. We find out that Bermondsey is near the river, to the south and to the east, and its postcode is SE1. That 1 means it's central, to the extent that anything is central in something as enormous as London. I like that. After all, we don't want to live in a neighbourhood that's essentially a village one-and-a-half hours away from Soho by Tube. We want maximum metropolis. And it's central. We can easily take daytrips to the most frantically hipster districts.

I do more reading and investigation. Bermondsey is famous for the Bermondsey Beer Mile, a long stretch of microbrewery bars located close to a food market. It's known for its art gallery, cinema, good restaurants, an annual street festival, and a weekly vintage market. The neighbourhood is partly pedestrianised and has loads of unique shops. Tick, tick, tick, tickety-tick! I see pictures of people wearing clothes that look like PJs and sitting with laptops in coffee bars that also sell second-hand books and undoubtedly hold cultural evenings that combine slam poetry and sour ale. And, as I said, our contact thinks it's a neighbourhood for grown-up hipsters, free folk who are major consumers of coffee, culture, and restaurants. Your kind of people, he says.

What sort of reputation do I actually have?

At any rate, there's no point trying to find out what the big thing is *right now*. All our experience and all the bickering among our London-savvy pals has shown us that either the neighbourhood itself won't be aware that it's cool or that its coolness will pass in the time it takes us to travel there.

We're going to Bermondsey. We're those kinds of people.

And now we're here. We're standing at the end of the partly car-free main road,

Bermondsey Street. From where we're standing, we can see at least five cafes and restaurants, and to our right we can hear the noise of a gigantic open-air street food venue.

We walk up the street with our enormous suitcases. Look at the signs on the sidewalk and in the window:

Mary's Living & Giving. It isn't simply a name, it's a philosophy

Private Offices. Coworking. Meeting Rooms. Happiness

Coffee. Cocktails. Working space

Pub. Bar. Sourdough pizza. Craft beer

Art Gallery & Sourdough

Library & Sourdough

Tapas and wine and sourdough

Ramen, ballet & sourdough

Sourdough Cinema

Our plan for day 1 in this neighbourhood was decided in advance: We'll go into every open place along the way and see what the city offers us. First off, the city offers us an absolutely fantastic cup of coffee in a coffee bar that is also a bakery and a cocktail bar. We drink it on the pavement while we are passed by thin, chatting folk in loose clothing. I think we're in the right place. The street is undoubtedly pleasant and undoubtedly full of what hardcore rural folk might call unnecessary extravagance. And people! The streets are packed, as are the cafes and restaurants. In the middle of the day, on a weekday. Don't people have jobs to go to?

A lot of these people are probably at work.

Those two over there, for example, with tats and expensive specs, each perched on their own bar stool beside a barrel laden with tapas: maybe they're having a work meeting, or taking a break from the office. Probably the office right across the street in a former warehouse with 15-foot ceilings, where they work in film production, podcasting, and sourdough.

A few yards further on, we come to a place that is, according to a board on the wall, a:

“Music venue, community space, workshop facility, hosting poetry slams, comedy nights, life-drawing sessions and more.” It's really great that they added “and more” so that people understand things really are happening here. A man sits outside with a book and a beer, so they obviously have a bar too, but maybe they didn't have room to put that on the board.

When we go inside, we see that it's actually a bookshop, with a slightly limited selection and far too many employees, some of them probably volunteers. A guy with bad posture and orange clothes sits at the counter looking at a screen with two young women, one of whom wears a T-shirt emblazoned with the cover of Pulp's “Different Class,” which came out six years before she was born. The volunteers put books on shelves at an impressively glacial pace. The regulars, who can hardly be cash cows, each sit at their own table, each with their own laptop or notebook. One of the men with a notebook gets up, goes over to the girl in the Pulp tee and reads out a newly composed poem to her. “Oh, that's lovely,” she says, then goes back to putting books on the shelves at an impressively glacial pace.

We ask if they have food. They do not. But they do have masses of local beers, and they stress that, by local beers, they mean from *this neighbourhood*. Because this is a beer shop as well as being a workspace, a bookshop, a cultural centre and a living room for

unpublished poets. We buy two more or less good, more or less cold local beers and study the programme hanging on the wall. Tonight there's a poetry open mic. That would be something. But we need to get some lunch.

We come to a café that looks like a kind of open-plan office for independent professionals. It is high-ceilinged and painted in pale colours. It smells of... Hmm... What *does* it smell of? The Contact Seeker reckons it's Wunder-Baum car freshener. Let's say incense. The walls are covered in a photo art project called something like Queer Platonic. No one says anything, everyone has comfortable clothes, clean hands, thin fingers, and translucent skin. And everyone is typing away on their laptop. Apart from three small tables which is where you take breaks apparently. It says: "Laptop-free zone." Those tables are occupied by people with comfortable clothes, clean hands, thin fingers, and translucent skin, eating small portions of food.

"We really can't stay here," says the Contact Seeker.

On our way to the flat to drop off our baggage, the Contact Seeker says: "Has it struck you that all the places we've been in here are like the supermarket on Utsira?"

"No, not really."

"The supermarket on Utsira is also a café, a souvenir shop, a restaurant, a pub. All the places here are more than what they actually are too. You get coffee. But you also get a workspace, art, poetry, books, and tepid neighbourhood beer."

"So the places here are like the supermarket on Utsira only a bit less likely to have things people actually need?"

"Don't say that. Hipsters need art and tepid beer. It's their oxygen."

After dropping off our baggage at the flat we've rented, which is small and characterless and has a tiny outdoor space overlooking the street, where some flats look very expensive and others look very cheap, and a shared garden, which is occupied by an upside down shopping trolley and sofa, we go in search of food, and the other side of the neighbourhood. That, of course, is the enormous advantage of big cities. If you don't like one thing, you can easily find another. And after our mild overdose of local beer, thin skin, and impromptu poetry, we go looking for the neighbourhood's grimier spots. With pub food.

And naturally they're easy to find too. Near the train station, hedged about by tall, modern office buildings with glass facades, for example, there's an old blue house that looks as if someone forgot to tear it down. It's the pub. With pop music playing just loud enough to sing along to, an uneven floor, holey wall-to-wall carpeting, and a bar in the middle of the room. And pub food. There's a post-work vibe. Some people will probably be taking the train home soon. Some people will probably miss this train. A man in a suit and a man in a hi-vis vest laugh together at the bar. Two women beside us talk extremely loudly about someone called "Siobhan". And a man with a professorial air sits in a chair that is, frankly, not big enough to accommodate him eating pallid fish and chips and reading a very thick book. What's not to like?

By the time I get back from the bar, the Contact Seeker has, naturally, made contact with the neighbouring table. It's occupied by two men just over midway through life. An American and an Indian. The Indian lives here and the American is visiting. They know each other because they worked together in Hongkong way back when. A thoroughly international duo, in other words. They nod and declare that they think they could live anywhere at all in the world apart from Russia. Then they move on. And their table is

claimed by two Swedish businessmen, who sit in the way only men in business would ever think of sitting: half-lying on their chairs with their arms behind their heads, and manspreading so aggressively that there's almost room to fit their entire egos between their knees.

We head off after eating up our own pallid fish and chips. We didn't come here to talk to manspreading Swedish businessfolk.

"Three nationalities in a short space of time," says the Contact Seeker when we're on our way out of the door.

"Four," I say. "The girl behind the bar was British."

A bit further into the neighbourhood, halfway up the high street, we find what looks more like a local pub for local people. There are barrels outside – that's never a bad sign. We go straight into the beer garden. And that's where everyone is. And almost everyone is standing. And shouting. We find a spot to stand and take in the scene.

"A penny for your thoughts," says the Contact Seeker.

"I think there are more people in this beer garden than there are inhabitants in Utsira Municipality."

"I do believe you're right."

A bit later, in the urinals, I nod and smile at the man beside me.

"It stinks in here," he says.

I say I agree.

He thinks.

“Somehow it’s a comforting smell,” he says. Then he heaves his equipment back into his trousers, washes his hands and leaves the little room with a “See you around, mate.”

I love conversations like that.

Back in the beer garden, the Contact Seeker has been doing her job again and established contact with the local population. I recognise the man she’s speaking to. I stood beside him at the bar earlier and overheard the bartender congratulating him on passing an exam. It turns out he’s a doctor and he’s been studying for some kind of additional professional qualification, which, as mentioned, he has successfully passed, so now he’s out celebrating, all on his own, because it’s a weekday and all his friends have families. It also turns out that he lives in the neighbourhood, likes hip hop, and recently got himself a German girlfriend, so he’s trying to learn German with the help of the language app, Duolingo. The Contact Seeker is trying to improve her French with the same app, so they exchange experiences and talk about their Duolingo addictions. He tries out his German on me, since, after all, I took German at school sixty-five thousand years ago. We agree that he needs to do a bit of work on it.

The most important thing about this man turns out to be that he knows of a place that’s open after the pub has closed. Of course he does, he lives here. It’s an underground bar right beside the crossroad down the street, in a space that used to be a public convenience, he tells us.

“What did you just say? That there’s a toilet bar under the ground at a crossroads?!”

“Something along those lines.”

“And what’s it called?”

“Bermondsey Arts Club.”

It's that kind of neighbourhood.

And thus it transpires that we conclude our first evening in London by taking daft pictures with a newly (further) qualified doctor in a former public toilet. Then go home to sum up the evening on our tiny balcony with a view of empty streets and a garden now occupied not just by a sofa and a shopping trolley, but a whole load of other furniture too. As we sit there, two foxes go ambling along the street. They pause to look at us, then walk on.

“There's more wildlife here than on Utsira,” says the Contact Seeker.

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The Day the Pub Is Open

It's hectic on Utsira right now. Our first visitor just left. The Contact Seeker has also gone away for the weekend with some gal pals on an annual trip to a Norwegian mountain destination – a time-honoured tradition that involves dancing on tables. My good friend Jens is coming to visit and will be here at the weekend. And once more, Utsira makes a disappointing first impression. I've warned Jens about the weather here. Told him to pack for wind and storms so he won't mess up the way we did. Bring boots and a rain jacket and a scarf, I said.

“Scarf?” he said.

I've warned him that the ferry crossing can be rough. Lie down, I said. It's nothing to be ashamed of. And use the sick bags on board — they're not there for decoration. You never know when it'll change. The weather can turn from sunny and windless to storm and hail in a matter of minutes.

Those are the kinds of things I've said.

He didn't take me seriously. I could tell. He's been laughing at me, inside at least. He thought I was play-acting, or that after ten days or so on an island in the North Sea, I'd become the kind of rural type we've both poked fun at on more than one occasion; the kind of person who boasts about how harsh and unpredictable it is out at sea, and how city folk, especially city folk from eastern Norway, have no idea about all this, or about how we live out here in the middle of the ocean, because there's no such thing as weather in eastern Norway, not proper weather, or wind, either – the occasional breeze, maybe, but not proper wind. He has been laughing at me.

And now he's on his way over from the mainland. And there's not a cloud in the sky, not a ripple on the sea. It's a windless, blazing spring day on Utsira. As the ferry approaches, I see my friend standing out on deck; he takes off his sunglasses, applies a spot of sun cream to his forehead, puts his sunglasses back on again and just stands there enjoying the spring sunshine. Then he sees me and grins.

I suspect he didn't really believe any of the stories I told him about there being a secret pub, restaurant, and darts club above the island's sole supermarket. Not really. He thinks it's rural folklore, the kind of nonsense everyone conspires to feed to visiting city folk. That's why it's so very annoying that on the precise weekend he'll be visiting, all my dart-playing pals will be away on a stag weekend in Stord. This weekend, there'll be absolutely nothing going on there at Krambuloftet. It annoys me because I was really keen for Jens to see it. He'd have liked it.

But I'd settled on a good Plan B: I thought we could go to the restaurant and eat some great food, picked and fished right outside the door – because, after all, it did say on Facebook that the restaurant would be open on Saturday too, didn't it? However a very close reading of that endless Facebook post about opening times, with exceptions and variations and footnotes and disclaimers about seaweed courses, reveals some extremely small print that informs me there's a private party tonight. I've messaged the owner and asked if it wouldn't perhaps be possible all the same to squeeze in two fairly quiet and pleasant men who aren't part of this private party, because I so want my friend to experience this fantastic restaurant while he's visiting. But she was immovable. Not even bigging up her restaurant helped.

I wanted to show these things to Jens. Because I like showing things I like to people I like. And because he needs it. Jens is an open, friendly, tolerant, kind man. But Jens is also

from Oslo. Excessively from Oslo. You'd have to work extremely hard to be more from Oslo than Jens is. His parents are Swedish, and even that's actually pretty typical of Oslo. If you drew up a list of everything Oslo-hating country folk hate about Oslo, it would add up to Jens. He's pleasant and chats easily with absolutely everyone, as if meeting new people was perfectly ordinary and nothing to make a fuss about. He was born and raised in the Norwegian capital. None of his family have every produced anything but books and research. He lives in an overpriced, gentrified neighbourhood in the city centre where there are three times as many vintage boutiques as manual workers, where petrol-driven cars are as absent from the streetscape as fisherfolk, where people vote Green and eat healthily, and it's considerably easier to find a freelance dramatist than an electrician. He doesn't have a car. And if he did have a car, he wouldn't have a clue what to do with it. He has some creative job without fixed working hours, he's never had dirt under his nails, has never milked, slaughtered, or built anything, and he's happiest drinking his coffee with milk and on the move.

I wanted my new friends on Utsira to meet him, and I wanted him to meet them. It's healthy to test out your prejudices in real life. I wouldn't say that's the only reason I invited Jens. But it is one of them.

So now what? Everyone I know has abandoned the island. Everything is closed. To us, at least.

What are we supposed to do instead? Sit and talk? I mean, that's nice enough, but we can do it just as well at home.

And, like I say, Jens is going to think I've made it all up, or at the very least that I've been exaggerating wildly. Of course he's thinking the same thing about the wind and storms as he strolls off the boat with his compact, urban wheelie case, mopping a few drops of

sweat from his brow. He's clad in city gear from head to toe. Light, spotless shoes, an open jacket.

He gives me a hug.

"Rough crossing today," he says.

"We're in for some wind tonight," I say, a bit more snarkily than I'd meant to.

"Sure."

He looks around.

"It's nice here, isn't it," he says.

The kind of thing pleasant Oslo folk say.

Yesterday, in sheer desperation, I messaged the owner of the pub. I mean, the pub called The Dala Boathouse, The Boathouse for short, not the secret darts club called Krambulofet. Of course, I'd messaged him once already, and I've also brought pressure to bear on the upper echelons of the municipality's political leadership: his wife – and possibly their cat. I asked whether there was any chance he might consider opening up this weekend. I laid it on really thick, saying my best friend from Oslo was visiting and I was really keen to show him some of the finest things the island has to offer. I hope he hasn't talked to the people at the restaurant and found out that I wrote more or less exactly the same thing to them first.

When he didn't reply after a quarter of an hour, I got the Contact Seeker to call him. She's much more charming than me on the phone. After a brief conversation involving much laughter, she told me the owner had sensed my desperation and besides, he had already decided, long before getting my message, to open the pub that Saturday evening. How people here know that the pub is open is a mystery. There's nothing online. On my way to the ferry, I walked past and checked. There's nothing on the door.

Of course, I was very pleased, perhaps a bit too pleased, when I heard the news. A major event! The Contact Seeker was pleased on my behalf, but I noticed she was a bit disappointed too. She'll be on her skiing trip this precise weekend so she'll miss season opening at the pub. Loser!

My expectations are sky high. Season opening at the pub. Everyone'll be there. Except for all those pals of mine who are on the stag weekend in Stord, of course. And except for everyone who's at the private party at the restaurant. But everyone else. All thirteen of them. And me, with an Oslo guy. I'm hoping this will be the evening we'll finally see a bit of friction between town and country. Here, at last, I'll meet the country folk on their home turf with their guard down and alcohol levels up, and I'll have an Oslo guy with me. Who's dressed like an Oslo guy. And talks like an Oslo guy. Not that he's some kind of jerk who'll hold his nose when he talks to peasants and make a scene if he can't get Oslo Brewing Company's Cloudy IPA on tap. Absolutely not. But he is the kind of guy who asks people questions. Really asks people questions. It may well be an occupational health issue because he's spent a good deal of his professional life—if you can call it that—interviewing people, and he tends to want to get to the bottom of things. Whereas I mostly just nod and pretend to be keeping up if someone tells me something I really don't understand. And most of the time I think I get away with it. I think, for example, that most of the people who have talked to me in the past few weeks about snubbing the cable in the spurling pipe actually believe I understood what they were talking about.

The fact is, I've developed a skill I'm pretty proud of over the years: I've become good – well, maybe not good, but at least passable – at sorting. I don't have to understand *everything*. I'm more than happy to understand *enough*. If I understand that what I'm being told is a joke, and I understand in broad-brush terms who or what kind of people are the

butt of the joke, I have everything I need to be able to join in. I don't *have* to grasp all the details. In other words, I'd make a hopeless investigative journalist. And I can live with that.

But my friend: he asks and he's interested. And he asks so much and is so interested that sooner or later even the most hardened introverts will be forced to ask a few questions back. And then it'll come out that he embodies everything country folk hate about people from the capital.

I point the pub out to him.

"You do realise you're going to have to do your bit this evening, right? Represent for Oslo?"

"Oh, I'll do my bit all right. I'll storm into the pub and yell 'Born in Oslo!' and say 'Huh?' every time anyone talks in dialect."

He lived through the nineties. He's an ironist.

"You won't do it."

"We'll see about that."

He won't do it. But at least now the idea has been planted.

"Just make yourself at home," I say, after showing him the pine house. "I need to drop in on my neighbour."

"Really?"

"I need to feed their cats."

"You're looking after your neighbour's cat?"

"Cats."

"Cats? How many?"

"Five. Borghild and Pelle and Avalanche and..."

"Five?!"

“Five.”

“How long will you be looking after five cats?”

“Two weeks.”

“Two weeks?! You’re looking after five cats for two weeks?”

“Yes.”

“And what will you get for that?”

“Mostly seafood. A bit of mince. And cookies. Lots of cookies.”

“And how long have you been here now?”

“And then I have to get a bit of work done – I have a meeting with Bollemussolini at midday.”

“You have a what now?!”

“Feel free to come along. It’s at the supermarket. Right across the street.”

For yes: not only is the pub open today; Bollemussolini has also messaged to say he’s on the island.

There are a lot more people at the supermarket than usual. By which I mean seven. I spot our man from Instagram at one of the tables. I’ve rehearsed my greeting in advance so I don’t accidentally call him Bollemussolini. Not right away at least. It’s possible people don’t know him by that name. And I’ve made a mistake or two like that in the past.

Once, many years ago, for example, I met a nice bloke who had played in some silly punk band in his youth along with a bunch of my mates. The band was called “Grandma and the eight thousand children.” Like so many other bands, the name was the best thing about it. And because the nice bloke my pals introduced me to had been the frontman in this band, of course he went by the name of Grandma. One time, I bumped into him on the street and

exclaimed enthusiastically, “Hey – aren’t you Grandma?” He blushed, looked at the people around him and muttered, “Not always,” before walking on. Only then did I notice that he was surrounded by a group of people in smart suits, and that he himself was wearing a suit and looked pretty serious. I googled him afterwards. He worked in a government department.

We walk over to Bollemussolini, aka Vidar, and greet each other like old acquaintances. We just have time to get ourselves a coffee before the deputy mayor comes over, says a hearty hello to Jens and asks if we’re thinking of going to the meeting of the Coastal Association. I’m about to burst out laughing when her face tells me this is no joking matter. There’s nothing for it but to add yet another item to the list of things you very rarely experience in a big city.

“There’s a meeting of the Coastal Association?” I ask, pulling myself together. “Is that why there are so many people here?”

“They serve coffee,” she says. “And probably food, too. There’s usually great food. You can just turn up.”

Right after that, another one of those people with a thousand different municipal jobs comes over. I’m fairly certain he’s a firefighter, a church warden, head of diversity, and class monitor. He, too, asks as if it’s the most natural thing in the world whether we’re planning to go to the meeting of the Coastal Association. And just to remind you: the two people he’s asking are a man who’s only going to be on the island for a month and a tourist who’ll be here for little more than twenty-four hours.

“I wouldn’t dare,” I say with a smile. “I’d be worried about getting roped into some job.”

“That *could* well happen,” he answers gravely.

A mate of Bollemussolini walks by and asks if we're thinking of going to the meeting of the Coastal Association.

Before we have a chance to say anything, Bollemussolini says he's thinking of going along.

"You're going to the meeting of the Coastal Association?"

"They serve coffee," says Bollemussolini, taking a sip of his coffee.

We manage to have a nice little chat with Bollemussolini before he has to leave for the meeting of the Coastal Association. It turns out that in his youth he was a central figure on Utsira's band scene, along with his – as he freely admits – far more musical cousin. And he confirms my suspicions that if you want to start a band in a place as small as this, you can make it. You don't have to work hard to find a music scene and a venue. You just say you want to start a band, and that's it: you've started a band. Everything else sorts itself out. He has, among others, been in a metal band, with the current mayor on keyboards. He's also played in a tribute band to a well-known Norwegian novelty band, and the local free church let them use its meeting house for rehearsals. And he was the lead singer in a tribute band to a Norwegian group with a vocalist whose trademark was sticking a sparkler up his arse.

"Have you...?" is all I manage to say before our friend who works in the supermarket walks past and confirms that most of the population of Utsira has seen Vidar's arse.

He also turns out to be fond of the sea and boats. And deep-sea fishing! He's one of those people who long for home. A shy and retiring rocker who longs for home. We agree that the road running through the centre of the island should be called "Bollemussolini Street," say we'll see each other at The Boathouse, and then it's time for him to go to the meeting of the Coastal Association.

“It’s a massive exaggeration, all that fuss about this wind,” Jens says. We’ve eaten some rather excellent leftovers from my neighbour and have gone out to sit on the sunny side of the house with a beer apiece.

“We’re in for some wind this afternoon and evening,” I say. “It’ll be a tough walk across the island.”

That afternoon, Vidar sends us photos from his rock band past. It looks to me as if all the pictures were taken at concerts at the old school. Or at the old school. Or at the old school. All the members of all the bands look very young. There’s a hint of corpse paint. And one photo shows a substantial percentage of Utsira’s population gazing at Vidar’s arse.

There’s something at once sweet and innocent, and slightly disturbing about these pictures.

Jens pulls his jacket more tightly around him.

“It really does look as if we’re in for some wind now,” he says.

I smile.

You’ve got to give me this: I still haven’t once said “I told you so” an hour later, when we’re standing inside looking out at the waves and the rain lashing against the windowpane. Yes, it really is lashing. Crashing, even.

“So when does this pub actually open?” Jens asks.

I check whether there’s anything on Facebook, and, in fact, there is. “Eight.”

“EIGHT?!?!?”

The wind blows harder and harder. I'm quite certain it must be at least a stiff something or another by now.

"We're simply going to have to make a choice," I say. "Do we aim for style, in which case it'll be freezing, and we'll end up getting cold and wet on the way to the pub? Or do we aim for practicality and sit in the pub in boots, rain jackets and scarves?"

"I haven't brought boots, a rain jacket or a scarf," says Jens. "Scarf? I don't even know the meaning of the word. We're city folk. We'll aim for style of course. We have to set an example. Show the peasants and fisherfolk how it's done. After all, we're the experts when it comes to this going-to-the-pub business. Not them."

"That's great, Jens. Make sure you say plenty of stuff like that at the pub."

Then we dress up in our rather stylish threads and we're all set. It's still only just past seven. The wind blows and blows. We wait a bit, but of course it doesn't let up.

Even walking slowly, with the wind against us, we still reach the pub at ten to eight. And once there, we have no choice but to stand outside in this weather dressed in our city gear for ten whole minutes. The lights are on in there. I try the door: it's open. Of course; perhaps it's always open.

Naturally, we're the first guests. The owner stands behind the bar looking like exactly what he is: a man who moved here from the city. And there we have one of the island's under-communicated attractions: Utsira's only draught beer tower.

We introduce ourselves, and I tell the barman that I'm the one who's been bothering him and bringing pressure to bear on his wife. As he serves us, he tells us he's just back from a lads' trip to Manchester. Well, a kind of lads' trip. A lad's trip with kids. And we have a manly little chuckle over that.

So here we are, then, in the company of a bushy-haired guy in relatively cool clothes drinking draught beer and discussing what's big in Manchester *right now*. It's almost like being at home.

We ask if he's expecting many people in tonight.

"On a night like this, I'll be happy with thirteen."

Thirteen is such a specific number that I have a suspicion he's guessed in advance exactly who those thirteen will be.

We order burgers made from meat that is, of course, sourced from a farm on the island. Then we sit down and wait for the other eleven guests.

And they pour in. The number quickly passes thirteen. A mixed assortment of people, including at least two eastern Norwegians, arrives, eats and leaves. A group that looks like some bizarre family reunion with only half the family sits down at another table. They're all men, they all look alike, the youngest looks eighteen and the oldest over seventy. One of them is extremely tall and, for some reason, he sits on a bar stool at one end of the table, so he has to adopt the drinking-giraffe pose to bring his face down to the same level as the other people around the table.

And then along comes Bollemussolini with his pal from earlier and some other people, one of whom I think must be the farmer who produced the meat we ate. He ate at home before coming out, I notice.

We ask Bolle – as we can call him now that we're getting to know each other – if he managed to make it through the meeting of the Coastal Association without getting roped into some job.

"I think so," he laughs.

“Just come and sit over here,” says Bolle, who obviously finds it odd that Jens and I are sitting at our own table.

And then – almost like in the British book – before we know it, the whole pub has become one long table. We say hi to everyone. I show off my local knowledge by asking people which one of the island’s three common surnames they have. Most *do* have one of those three names. And one of them turns out to be the father of the mayor. As for the rest of the family relationships around the table, I try not to think about them, although I’ve got it into my head that there’s some connection between this family and Bollemussolini too, and the shopkeeper, but he’s on a stag weekend in Stord, so we don’t need to think about that at any rate. And just like the shopkeeper when the darts pub is open, the pub landlord here is both barman and guest. He sits on a chair a little way away from the table, ready to fetch refills for anyone who orders them, but he also joins in the conversation around the table.

Is it a pub? Is it a private party? The boundaries blur on Utsira.

So here I am, then, sitting with the mayor’s father and her husband, and a chap whose backside the entire population has seen, and a pal of his who’s come along after the meeting of the Coastal Association, and a farmer, and a few older men besides, one of whom is extremely tall. Between oldest and youngest, there’s a gap of forty years. Only men.

Talk turns to local conditions. Bolle earnestly declares that growing up on Utsira has given him the ability to identify the cardinal points at all times, regardless of where in the world he is. The mayor’s father talks about journeys he has taken. Someone starts to reminisce about the time when a group of architecture students used come to the island from Bergen for a few months every year. Everyone seems to recall this as a good time. All except one, who mutters darkly about someone having to clean up after those students. The

rest just laugh and keep on telling stories about the students. One tells a story about a hammer. Of course, I don't really follow all the details, but I'm fairly certain the punchline is that students from the city have no idea how to use a hammer. The atmosphere is great, with plenty of laughter, and rounds being ordered at a truly impressive tempo.

I look at my pal and realise there won't be any town vs. country clashes tonight either. Jens has placed his hand on the shoulder of the mayor's father and his eyes are swimming. They're talking about travel. The father says he always takes taxis when he's away.

"Always?"

"Always!"

"So if you land in Heathrow and you're heading to Manchester..."

"Taxi!"

Then the mayor's father buys a round of whisky and sodas, though not before telling the story about why whisky and soda is called *pjølter* in Norwegian – the story that has always been told by anyone who has ever ordered whisky and soda in Norway, at all times, and thus it shall be and thus shall it always remain for all eternity. Closing time is also a blurred concept.

We say goodbye to the mayor's father and watch him walk up one of Utsira's few side streets.

"He's no stranger to headwinds," says Jens.

"He's no stranger to headwinds," I say.

On the way home, Jens seems almost evangelical.

“This is exactly what I love best in life. Sitting in a place, and drinking and chatting and kidding around with different people well into the small hours.”

“What happened to ‘Born in Oslo!!’?”

“But I *liked* this.”

“You didn’t deliver. You were supposed to be the annoying Oslo guy who didn’t understand the dialect. Instead you sat there with your arm around some old geezer, drinking shots and laughing at stories about city folk who don’t even know how to use a hammer.”

“I didn’t understand that story.”

“Me neither. But you laughed anyway.”

“Sorry. I got carried away.”

“I get it, I really do. It was that kind of an evening.”

“It was that kind of an evening.”

Jens is late down to breakfast. I give him a cup of filter coffee.

“How’re you doing today?” I ask.

“Could be worse.”

“What would be *the* worst?”

“I think the worst would be to wake up the morning after with a thundering headache and the vague feeling that you were elected chairman of the Coastal Association yesterday night.”

We give this some thought.

“What do people do in Coastal Associations anyway?”

“I’ve never understood it.”

He goes outside with his coffee and stands on the decking for a while looking out to sea, then comes back in again.

“I think we’re in for some wind today,” he says.