

9/11/2004

Helga—

My apologies for taking so long to write and thank you for your generous hospitality while I was in Trondheim. Our dinner was a highlight of my Norwegian adventure! I appreciate your taking time to invite me to your beautiful home. And your stories of Lofoten prepared me for what I might experience there. I had such a wonderful time in Kabelvag and hope that I can return there soon for a longer period of time. If you can, it would be best to print out this letter; there is so much that I have wanted to share with you.

With the help of the project coordinator, I tried to arrange a visit with Knut Rotlem. Unfortunately, he was not in Kabelvag while I was there. I was disappointed that I didn't have the chance to meet him. In fact, there were some others from the school to whom I was guided but never had the chance to meet. Did you know a history teacher by the name of Hakun Brun? Several people told me that he is an excellent storyteller and knows everything about the history of Kabelvag. So I will have to wait to meet him until my next visit. Two weeks was not nearly enough time for me to reach deeply within the Lofoten culture. Still, I was really pleasantly surprised by experiences with people there, how willing they were to spend time talking with me.

I thought of you several times while I was in Kabelvag. Your advice about what to see and do was so helpful. By chance, on my first day in Kabelvag, I made my way to the Lofotmuseet and the gallery of Espolin. I was enchanted by his work. To be surrounded by his fantasy world made Kabelvag more real to me. How can I explain this? His interpretations of the area seemed more genuine than simply what was available to see at first glance. I suppose I am referring to his visions of the supernatural, the land of the huldras, draugs, and so on. In a bizarre way, it made sense to me that he was able to create this work even though he was nearly blind. He saw things in a different way. I think my favorite of his work is the Fylgje (Guardian). This particular painting/drawing normalizes the fantasy world without reducing or demeaning it: the merger of what is 'real' and what is 'imaginary' so that there is almost no reason to distinguish barriers between the two worlds.

Perhaps this is the most important lesson I carried away from my visit to Kabelvag: for many, there is but a thin membrane between story and everyday life. What you believe depends on experience and intuition, two very important tools for surviving the harsh Lofoten climate. It wasn't until speaking with you that I truly understood the seriousness of this area's nature. I spent my time there, as I had hoped, talking to people about local superstitions, beliefs and stories. I encountered another level of phantasm-story that I had not expected: a kind of urban legend that seems to be shared by young adults (high school to college age) about certain haunted buildings on the island. I think I had told you that in preparation for my visit, I had read a number of traditional Norwegian folk tales and also researched Norse mythology. From these stories I learned about the links between worlds and could see a kind of germination of the folk tale from the mythology (as well as connections to Christian creation stories). So I was curious how the stories that people might tell me would relate to these older tales. Some of the older folks I spoke with (60s-70s) shared stories about little people, princesses, trolls and so on...with anecdotes emphasizing the truth of the story (evidence in nature such as holes in rocks, or sightings of little people).

But the younger folks, didn't talk about these stories. They told me instead about haunted buildings. One fellow told me about his grandmother, who bought a house in the center of town. The upstairs was divided into seven small rooms, as this had once been a boarding house for the fishermen. She tried for several nights to sleep upstairs but she could not. She heard things in the walls (my story teller did not specify the exact sounds). This sleeplessness became unbearable for the grandmother, so she decided to take out all of the walls separating the rooms. And sure enough, after this change, there were no more strange sounds at night. According to his grandmother, the souls of the fishermen were trapped in the walls and they needed to be released. The story teller told me, that according to him, some people can feel these things and others don't. He also told me that he had heard that if you look at the northern lights you will die (have you ever heard anything like this before?). It was interesting, that when I first asked him about superstitions and so on, he replied that he had never heard of anything like that around there. But when we started looking at Espolin's paintings (and he told me that

the museum was built on the spot where Esoplin lived and had sighted some spirits out at sea—I think this is depicted in the Lysbroen (The Bridge of Light) work, then he started telling me these other tales (or what I think of as urban legends).

I am not sure of the exact definition of 'urban legend' and how it would apply to a place like Kablevåg, which I consider to be more of a town than a city (at least in terms of population). What was curious to me, was the fact that several young people told me similar stories of haunted buildings and when I asked the older folks about these stories, they all scoffed at them. I started to wonder about the role of stories in general and how to compare these haunted building stories with other more traditional stories about Draugen and especially Marmalen (who are also ghostly spirits).

One of the young women who works at the Lofotmuseet told me that one of the museum's buildings is known by many to be haunted. She and the others who work there will not lock that building by themselves. They have developed a system, so that the last person working at the Espolin Gallery comes to the museum at closing time so that there is at least two who lock the building. She said she won't even go into the building on her own, though she is not as afraid of the building on sunny days when all of its doors are open. (I have attached some images of the building and part of her recorded story.) I met her grandmother and asked her about the idea that the building is haunted and she just laughed! She herself had worked at the building as a night nurse when it served as an old age home in the 60s and 70s. The granddaughter suspected that the ghosts were the folks who had inhabited the old age home. She was quite sincere about her belief even though she herself has never heard or seen anything specific. She also told me that the building that our group was using (near the old prison) was also known to be haunted. This building is used as a film school and students will not spend time there by themselves especially at night. I asked another student about this story and she confirmed similar feelings. But when I told the director about this story, she said it was the first she had heard of it. In both stories, it is the staircase that is the origin of strange sounds.

It seems that these haunted building stories are told from youth to youth and not shared with adults. Whereas some of the more traditional folk stories are told by adults to youth in order to teach some kind of lesson (morals, right/wrong, appropriate behavior, etc). I am wondering about your opinion of my theory, and if you have heard such 'urban legends' among your students.

I am also attaching a small sound file and some photos from my fishing adventure---what an amazing experience that was! I was inspired by your story about your fishing adventure, and someone that I met encouraged me to go on a boat. He told me that if I really wanted to hear about fishing superstitions, I had better be in the right atmosphere, on the boat itself. So one morning I met with a group of fishermen and they were telling me all kinds of unlucky on-board boat don'ts: no brown cheese, no knapsacks, no horses, no wood-working tables, no women, no waffles....you know. One of the fellows kindly agreed to let me travel on his fishing trip that night. I had never been on a boat like that. So beautiful, liberating almost. I was surprised how relaxed I was. And the fisherman was very patient with me, allowing me to record and take lots of photos (some are attached for you). All the while he talked about what he was doing (technically) and told me fishing stories, legends and so on. He also told me that the night before, he had caught 100 kilos of fish, and the night before that, 400 kilos. The fishing had been very good. But the night that I was on board, we went back to Kablevåg early because the catch was so poor. I was extremely apologetic, thinking that as a woman he felt I had brought him bad luck. Nej, nej, no, not at all. However, when I offered him a sandwich I had made, he asked me if there was any brown cheese. He was quite relieved that there was none.

Well, Helga, I am sure that I could write many more pages to you about my experiences. But I want to send off this already late letter to you. Thank you again for your generosity. And I hope that we can one day meet again in Trondheim. If you are ever in California, be sure to give me a call. I would have you over to eat some good local cuisine.

Good luck with the new school year and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best regards,
Sue