

## Jessica Furseth 31, Writer

*"The funny thing is, I never felt Scandinavian until I left."*

We're moving, my bike and I, the traffic around us is menacing but today it creates the perfect hum. My wheels are a butch girl called Lola, I'm a scrawny girl in woollen layers. I've got music in my left ear and the rush of the city in my right, I know what I'm doing here, moving through roundabouts, edging up to be first in line at the big crossings. Casual but cocky in my element, I stretch my back out as I wait for the light to turn green. This city, this country, it's my home, I feel it in my bones, it's there in the buzz on my skin.

I've lived in England for almost 12 years now, a third of my life. I was raised Viking, in Norway where it's dark for an hour in the summer and you pay for that with blood in the winter. I was a kid then, an awkward teenager who left in a huff the first chance she had. Norway and I have since forgiven each other, but the feeling of detachment remains. There's space between the houses up north, in the country that provided me with pale skin and fawn-coloured hair, there's space between the people. There's a stillness, a quiet understanding of what we are, that we are all the same. Everywhere are tall pines, wide valleys, and whitewater rivers, subdued by eight months of winter. If I never see snow again that will be fine with me.

People ask me about Norway, about the food, music and culture, but I don't know the answers to the questions anymore. A decade changes things - I know this, because the few days a year I spend there are enough to show me, again and again, how they've moved on without me. There's an irony at work here: I left because the world is such a big place, and what happened was I ensconced myself on this small, crowded island, squinting backwards with increasingly foreign eyes. When I visit them up north I drive my mother's car to the shop and panic at the sight of another vehicle, because everyone's driving on the wrong side of the road. The reprogramming is happening.

It took a while, but I've figured out how to live in England now. I have learned what clothes to wear when the weather is muggy and shifty, the art of banter and the fact that "how do you do" isn't actually a question. ►

I go back to where I came from and people expect me to be the same, or should I say, they expect me to have kept up with the changes, but instead the years pass and I stumble at Norwegian words. My language is rusting, I don't recognise the people in the paper, I balk at the price of peppers in the shop, I carry my umbrella everywhere even though up north it doesn't really rain. The air feels cold inside your nostrils, you can hear the gravel crunch underneath your shoes and life feels so slow.

The funny thing is, I never felt Scandinavian until I left. It's only now I understand how much of me is shaped by the place I come from. How pragmatism is a national trait, not a personal one. How things so often aren't about common sense, they are about culture. England isn't a big leap in global terms, but it's big enough to trigger an awareness about how the customs of the people around us shape our choices. Even now, after a decade in England, the culture around me isn't really mine, meaning I get to choose. But every year that passes I understand a little more about this country, one discovery leads to the next, like peeling an onion. In England, the air is damp even when the sun shines, it feels different than anywhere else in the world: the constant crowds, the cracks in the pavements, the roasted foods and a language that rolls in the mouth. Everything has rounder edges, everything is patched together by people from all corners of the world, adding their stories to the tapestry that makes up this small island.

At night I pull my woolly cardigan around me, the stars are the same ones I've always looked at but here they're positioned differently in the sky. I was just a kid when I got here, suitcase full of tinned fish, looking not for England but simply for something different. I'm a grown up now, and I realise the passage of time would have changed me even if I'd stayed put. There's still a lot of Scandinavian in me - the skin that burns in the sun, the pragmatic core that borders on rudeness. Norway may have brought me up but it's England that raised me, it's where I've made my bed. I feel it every time I return, when my plane lands and the wheels jump against the runway. I know I am home, it's the feel of you when you're around me. ►

