

Christmas 1999

A torchlit procession of children and adults wound its way last night from the edge of the village and through the pine forest between the mountains. Some walked, and some used the traditional sledge-on-skis which is perfect when the snow is hard frozen. All the branches were bending under the weight of snow. In a clearing a couple of miles up from the village, a big pine tree was decorated with candles, Father Christmas's elves sat around with burning torches (the man himself turned up with a sack later), and a huge vat of hot spicy punch and piles of gingerbread were laid out. It was the scouts that had put all this together, and it was enjoyed by the whole village (young and old).

This afternoon, Thomas (5) was going to a birthday party in a neighbouring village. As we drove there, Tracy and I talked about how difficult it was to describe. To begin with, the fjord was steaming so much that the road alongside was thick in cloud. The water was steaming, of course, not because it was hot, but because the air was cold (some -18°). We turned off this road and drove through the forest, where everything seemed blue. The sky was a cloudless dark blue (this was late afternoon, so it was just starting to darken a little), the snow all around was blueish, the mountains (over 6000 feet high in a circle around the village) were also blue. The river was of course frozen solid. Every tree (and this being Norway, there's a lot of them) was bending under the weight of snow. The effect was magical, but there is no way we can put it into words.

We will be spending this Christmas and New Year in Britain — Christmas in Wales and New Year in Lancashire. This will be the second time we've been away from Norway the last nine christmases, and we're looking forward to it very much indeed. We'll be driving down to the South coast of Norway (a 12-hour drive) and catching the boat from Kristiansand to Newcastle. Sandy the dog will be staying at his usual "hotel" in the nearby village of Bjorli — and we hope he'll wrap up warm as it's -34°C there today (roughly twice as cold as a deep freeze). Sorry to keep going on about the temperature, but someone wrote to us today from England and said that it was so cold it had nearly snowed ...

This year, we had a long, hot summer with lots of visitors from Britain and elsewhere. Most of them were dragged (more or less willingly) up a nearby mountain to admire the view and the snow; Bethan, Matthew, Thomas and the dog became steadily faster at getting up, until we adults were left far behind. There was a lot of swimming in the fjord, too.

Bethan will be 11 in March (what a thought!) and is active in all sorts of things, from skiing to trombone playing. Matthew (9 in April) has changed back to Måndalen school (where he went before we moved here) and is enjoying it very much. It's a

good class, and an excellent teacher. He too is keen on skiing, football etc., and generally interested in everything. Thomas (5) has started pre-school this year, and will start school proper next Autumn. He still has a knack for capturing hearts; on a recent visit to Britain we took a train ride to Manchester and an elderly lady gazed at Thomas for half an hour on the train, before saying: "isn't he *wonderful*?". And then there is, well, XXX (due in February). Hopefully we'll be able to give glowing descriptions of XXX next year; for the moment, enough to say that Tracy is large and somewhat slowed, but otherwise uncowed.

Obviously, there's been less competition riding for Tracy this year, although she was invited to ride for the Norwegian national team earlier in the year, and she came 4th in a national competition. Otherwise, the year has been spent teaching and translating. The translating business is going well, and now has a web site (<http://www.noproblem.no>).

All this technology. Where will it end? We now use E-mail all the time. Tracy's address is: rishton@noproblem.no and Tim's address is tim.rishton@kun.uit.no.

The latter is at the University of Tromsø, where Tim is still leading the church music section, as well as doing a lot of concert playing (see <http://www.musicbase.org/RIS001.html>). This means a lot of travelling backwards and forwards, but it's worked very well. It's also been exciting, involving planning meetings at government level as well as travels in Lapland (an unforgettable visit to lake Inari in Finland, which was still frozen solid in June).

So there we are: all of us in our different ways facing an exciting new year. We're very ashamed to send a *photocopied* letter this year, but it's so busy with going away

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