THE NORTH WAY

Part I: The Longest Day

Wheels down, and I've been awake for nearly twenty-four hours. The plane jumps, drops between the understandings of flying and rolling with a thud and I land between the concepts of American and the present; the two separated for the first time. For the last few months, Oslo, Norway, had been a conversation starter, something to break the ice, convincing new acquaintances I'm worth talking to for a moment more.

Ten hours in a sun-lit flight has changed that, setting back my internal clock from 6:00 pm departure to 11:55 am arrival. The guards of Copenhagen's customs push passengers through, bleary-eyed Seattleites no more. I'm thousands of miles (though I will soon force myself to make the switch to kilometers) from home, and now all the fancies I've entertained are here, in front of my face, telling me I've got twenty minutes to cross this airport and go find another of SAS's many flights.

So many people talked to me about Europe as the Mecca of culture and though I'm extremely worn out, I still feel as if I'm going to cross the threshold of my Kansas cabin to see Oz in Technicolor. The sheer radiance composing every element of this enlightenment is found in every tale I hear of vacations to Rome, Venice, Paris, London, and all the other "must-sees." Before leaving I thought if I paid attention and scrutinized closely the details I was seeing, I would pull so much more from them. I may have put those goggles on myself, but even the airport is trying to teach me something I'm not attuned enough to grasp quite yet.

"Did I finally fall asleep somewhere over Reykjavik?" I ask the first girl that arrives after I dash into an empty terminal, without passengers, clerks, or a plane. Few if any of the Pacific Northwest passengers follow my connection and I immediately wish we moved as a group. I haven't even spoken to these people, but I want their familiarity around me: the prudish man two seats over, the woman who spent her entire time tending her kids, the elderly man that reassured me with a slight nod and wink when the stewardess shouted about my bag in a foreign language.

The girl I spoke to, a Belgian I discovered, is the only one with me in the terminal for the first fifteen minutes, making me increasingly nervous. Insecurity is on all sides now, and I keep it guessing by acting outgoing and talking to anyone and everyone around me. Most times the first few words are enough for people to guess my language and even nationality. The Belgian girl looks fifteen with her frizzy hair and innocent face, but she's a master of Dutch, German, English, French, and Norwegian. She's coming to Oslo to study, like me, but we're going to different schools. Ten hours ago, I was one of the most articulate people I knew, majoring in English and creative writing. I had three stories published in two literary journals, and would constantly offer words when someone faltered or halted their speech, recognizing instantly the pause and blank, searching-for-a-word face. Now I need to apologize simply to communicate. I hoped the awkwardness would pass, but it was only a hope I had developed during the formative years of high school (if I was going to try to fit in, it would be through my own massive effort).

More than ever, I regret the Norwegian language CDs I had ordered online not coming. I tried friendliness, but more often than not, especially over the next few days, I felt my mouth had been taped shut, and whenever someone spoke, I quietly stepped out of the situation unless absolutely necessary. Knowing a language foreign to the foreign country I had just landed in didn't bode as well as I had hoped. I didn't even know the Norwegian alphabet's extra letters.
I dozed for thirty minutes on the plane from Copenhagen to Oslo, a mere hour, starting our final descent shortly after the pilot welcomed us aboard. I spent twelve hours in transit from Seattle to Oslo, only to have my internal clock set back once I was inside the city. I watched the countryside whip along as I took a train to the heart of Oslo, already seeing a difference between Europe and America. In the states one might discover mountains of evergreens in the Pacific Northwest, valleys too deep to see the bottom in western Colorado, recently cleared fields in south Louisiana, or rock mesas and desert in all four states comprising the Four Corners. But here humble houses dotted peaceful fields of light viridian as we shot by, traveling to our southern destination of Central Oslo.

Traveling with a school program called USAC, I was given a map of the campus and contact information for seventeen other Americans due to arrive a week later at my international student dorm I was staying in, Sogn or Kringsjå, or how to find either. I had hoped to integrate seamlessly, but now I was prepared to act like what I was quickly becoming: a failed and lost tourist. I asked about “Haraldsheimv” but the girl at the hostel also didn’t have a clue. I would learn, weeks later, this was an abbreviated version of an actual street name, “Haraldsheimveien.” I asked the girl if she knew any open hostels or hotels and she said most were probably booked for the same reason until Sunday morning. She then pointed vaguely on my map saying she believed my best bet was to try a tourist information booth somewhere around there, though she didn’t know where. It was quite sunny outside, but I strapped on my leather jacket and backpack once more, grabbed my luggage, and walked, dejected, back onto the street.

I had hoped to integrate seamlessly, but now I was prepared to act like what I was quickly becoming: a failed and lost tourist. My dreams of walking into this city proudly, setting myself up competently and establishing my new home with minimal difficulty were gone. When the study abroad office at Washington State University warned the mass of students going abroad about culture shock I thought they were talking directly to the weakest person in the crowd. I thought I could impress my family, friends, and self by strolling to the center street in a foreign country, and instantly weaving in. Instead, I was stuck in daylight wearing a thick leather coat, sweating, wheeling a fat and whining suitcase, hair greasy and eyes tired, posture hunched over and stomach growling, as I followed one person’s poor directions after another back and forth along a single street like a wooden duck at a shooting range. A couple at a restaurant table outside even waved at me, acknowledging they were following my progress with glee over a couple beers. I examined street signs, retrieved my map, found myself, walked another block, and repeated.

In the back of my mind, I knew I had to find a room in a pre-booked city and what little kroner I had received as a birthday present would disappear, spent at a hotel natives wouldn’t book for either price or quality, and eating out would be a constant. Those, along with what came to be known in my mind as “that smell,” were my three biggest concerns. I had abandoned the desire to show off as I went somewhere none of my family had been for the last century or more, and decommissioned all my ambitions toward survival by way of accomplishing those three goals. My thoughts drifted into a place they only do when I am faced with extremes. I didn’t need to feel good on the outside as long as I didn’t feel bad on the inside, and I didn’t need food without a place to live as long as my body would do what I told it to, and it wouldn’t run out of energy in that sense for some time. The original goals of this voyage, learning and becoming worldly, were left behind in the Copenhagen airport. So far away, I no longer remembered them.

Constantly trying to secure myself food and shelter, I failed to notice commercialism and culture’s turf war in Oslo. Kebab shops, Asian Express Take-Outs, and signs for fjord tours including genuine Norwegian prawn buffets threatened fountains and statues. Henrik Ibsen, the most celebrated Norwegian author, and Ludvig Holberg shared statue space with Franklin Roosevelt and nameless workers. Like America, Oslo’s public statues are more interested in political correctness than emotion, and
I could hook my foot through the handle in my suitcase and hope if it was stolen it would wake me up.

city blocks, docks, and every corner of any important building for the sake of simply existing.

What must’ve been painstaking if intended, was something I noticed a few weeks after I arrived. Almost anywhere in Oslo you stand, buildings are short enough and spaced far enough apart to see the skyline looking straight ahead. Once your face is turned upward, vast portions of the deep blue sky are open, and with few lights a good deal of the stars are visible at night in clear weather.

There were no people in the entire country I knew to help me. If all the hotels and hostels were booked, I would still need to sleep eventually. The only thing that came to my tired mind was that the park was free, and I could sleep there for the first night. I could hook my foot through the handle in my suitcase and hope if it was stolen it would wake me up, pull my other two pairs of jeans out of my luggage as well as another coat, and bundle up for the night on a bench. This I seriously considered, but with daylight still present, I decided to hunt until I was locked out of stores by their metal gates.

One helpful native remembered Tourist Information was back the way I had come, I needed to take a turn; a new development! Excited, I trundled off again, looking down streets for a fairly obvious sign. Sure enough, two blocks down, big and blue, the letters were above a door, and I practically broke out in a run to get there. I took a number and was more than happy to wait my turn simply elated I had found the place.

While my number was next, there was another American (I was getting good at hearing them already), with a thick head and buzzed hair asking in a rude manner how the entire city could be completely booked. He insisted, with the obvious belligerence of past failures and repeated denials, there must be somewhere with an opening, some hostel forgotten by the masses surging into the city to witness the game. The clerk, another pretty blonde girl, kept telling him she wasn’t going to look through the entire phone book and call every place for him. I wheeled my luggage behind me in the middle of the lobby, sat on it and cradled my forehead in my hand, laughing to myself, “I’m so fucked.” The girl’s final suggestion was to take his car and drive a little ways out of the city as the only way he might find lodging. He accepted it as a solution and made a conspicuous exit.

I wheeled my luggage up wearily, about to accept the sentence of a night in the park. “I think I have his same problem. Nowhere to stay in the whole city?”

"I'm afraid it looks like all the hostels are booked, but I can try a couple," she said sweetly, hoping to avoid another angry American. “Like I told him, your best bet is to go outside the city.”

"Well if you could try, I'd appreciate it." She pulled a phone book and began running her finger down the page. I saw a pamphlet that read, “Norway in a day!” on her desk, and I couldn't help myself, "I've been in the country four hours and I'm offended by that.)

She smiled, “What price range are you looking for?”

"As long as it has a bed, I'll be ecstatic." She thumbed through a few more pages. I began joking with her, as is my normal custom with customer service workers, or has turned my custom ever since I was one of their numbers. The more I talked, the more I forgot about my situation and just enjoyed seeing the glint of a customer she might actually remember in her eyes. Eventually I got to the subject of my situation, about my dorm administration closing thirty minutes after I landed.

She looked astonished when I finished, “You mean they didn't hold the keys for you?” I was told Norwegians were nice once you got to know them, but the thought of asking such a favor had never occurred to me. For both reasons, I felt stupid, and said nothing as she already had the phone to her ear. Her second call, she had found me a room for the equivalent of $110 a night, and marked it on my map when produced. She pointed out the little green I's that indicated the Tourist Information office the entire time, but marked how to get to the hotel from the wrong icon. I only noticed once I was in the hotel lobby, but was able to find my way to my hotel; a building that looked like it was caught in a game of corners between two others. Once again I had to assume the clerk would understand English. He happily switched over, though I was the foreigner, making me regret more and more a lack of effort to learn Norwegian, as I could focus on basic decency again.

The hotel seemed constructed in an alleyway at first appearance, with a thin lobby and two glass doors at the entrance spanning the width of the building's exterior. One could hardly move around the lobby if there were more than two others without dramatic shuffling and wheeling of luggage and persons. Once upstairs, like a door to another dimension, the hallways stretched into an unheard of space with a corridor about as far as I could shout and the better part of a minute needed to traverse it. And then, when my room's door was opened I returned to the world in which the hotel was built. Again I could reach both sides at once with outstretched arms. Food was an easy matter, as once I dropped all my luggage and dozed for an hour or two, it became time to explore and I found myself one street corner away from Oslo's main street: Karl Johan's Gate.

It's difficult to tell whether Karl Johan, who won Norway back from Denmark in 1814 and who the street is named after, would approve of the area now, 193

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years later. In four blocks I saw two McDonalds, two Burger Kings, and three 7-11s. A shame for someone just coming from America and looking for change. Here also was the home of many tourist and souvenir shops, the first of many seen during my stay. Outside the American shops are clothes stores, blasting American pop music, full racks shouting “Salg!” wheeled onto the street itself, which is traveled only on foot, but wider than many places cars are allowed. Street performers play popular rock songs or traditional accordion music and pubs spill their patrons out into the rapidly chilling August air. Up one way is the royal castle, the front of the park I had been eyeing, and down the other is the central station, where I eventually wandered. Connected by a sky bridge to Oslo City, a massive five-story mall, Oslo Central Station boasts its own share of shops of all types, from Internet to mobile phones to food to trinkets of unimaginable quantity and purpose. It was here, after everything had practically closed and I rolled my eyes walking in, I found a small grocery store no bigger than a 7-11 back home. I bought food for the night and morning, shampoo and soap to take care of “that smell,” and quickly found my way to my room. It was only then I found no fridge in the hotel, only a deceptively uncomfortable chair, a tv, a shower/toilet, closet, and bed filling the space. I gorged myself on all I had bought, and after a shower, drifted off to sleep with wet hair still soaking the pillow.

Over the next few days I would be fully mesmerized for two hours by Akershus Fortress, take a cruise through the fjords at dusk, get hit on by a man in his late forties, see the biggest single mobile structure I have ever laid eyes on, examine innumerable statues and take pictures like a tourist. While I quickly dozed off, I realized: I was in a country completely unknown by my family and friends, a new city, country, continent. And as the sun sets on the longest day, totaling 33 hours, I realize, whatever I want to learn, or do, or see, I’m free to now, because it has all opened itself to me.

Part II: Parties, Pubs, and Permanent Acquaintances

“Buddy groups,” while hardly an original concept, produced nothing but groans from me, knowing the overly optimistic look at the campus, the school activities, functions, clubs, and attempt at introductions under the excessively moral eye of the University staff. The worst part was how you would see these people later, and actually try to get to know them, but it was a front they wore for the week, and they really don’t actually care.

That is, until I had lunch the first day with Per Ivar and Øyvind, our buddy group leaders. “So,” Per opened, in his red shirt all buddies were supposed to wear the first day, as we sat sprawled on the grass haphazardly, munching on sandwiches and bottles of water provided by the University, “they planned a bunch of activities for us, but most of them are pretty lame. We’re allowed to organize events for ourselves, and lead them, so I was thinking a tour through the city for those new to Oslo, a pub crawl through Grønland, since beer’s cheaper there, and the student bars, and maybe a barbecue at one of our houses. But since it’s your introduction to the city and the University, is there anything you all want to do?”

Øyvind was tall and skinny, with the blonde hair of a model. He understood more nuances about America than most, as it was his area of study, including cowboy boots, large belt buckles, and the word “reckon” in his daily routine. He came in, “you don’t need to think of anything right now. There’ll be a beer tent here at six tonight. We could discuss it then. Also, if not everyone wants to do everything, we could always split up.”

I raised my hand sheepishly. “Isn’t there a jazz festival going on this week somewhere downtown?”

“Yes,” Per said. “There’s one. We could look into that.” Amanda, a friend I met amongst a gaggle of German girls in my kitchen, related Per’s shorter stature and mane of short brown hair and connecting beard to Mr. Tumnus from the Chronicles of Narnia. Amanda was from Canada, and we eventually applied that formula to everyone we knew: Pete from England, Conrad from Germany, Claire from Australia, Ivana from Serbia, Sabina from Romania, etc. Eventually, we shortened “Amanda from Canada” to “Camanada,” while I became “Skymerica.”

Beer sponsored by a University was a new phenomenon to me, as well as a flexible and unscheduled buddy group. I experienced one on my introduction to WSU; it had been stilted, organized to the minute, and planned with the most wholesome activities. As it turns out, UiO has a student bar at the basement of each faculty building. The pub-crawl through Grønland ended at one of the two bars Per worked at, and it was more like a gathering of friends you never knew you had rather than people assigned to spend time with each other. Sitting around a table, one would have difficulty telling how long ago we had all met. Various people dropped out of the group in pursuit of their own activities, and even now they seem permanent acquaintances, people who no matter how many times I run into them, I feel like I don’t know them all that well. Conversely, I’ve only seen Per a few times since the buddy week finished, but we greet each other like old friends (at least, old compared with everyone else I know here). I mention some trips I’m planning, and he’s animated and enthusiastic about joining, though he never has. We won’t see each other for a week or two, and then after a chance encounter, organize a lot of our friends to meet the two of us down at a bar that night.

Per and Øyvind had even bought a lot of wine and alcohol for the group (since most of them were under 20), and made multiple bowls of punch and mixed drinks while we made sausages and burgers at the barbecue we eventually put together. It was so relaxed that when I started looking for cheese to put on my burger, one of the Norwegians sighed, and said disapprovingly, “Americans put cheese on everything,” and thought up the worst dishes to add cheese to, as she slopped potato salad onto her patty. Almost immediately, Per and Øyvind started speaking gibberish with numb tongues to ridicule her northern accent, and she threw a towel at them in retaliation.

While the buddy group introduced me to some of my closest friends here, the integration of students in other practices has not been so impressive. Kringsjå, my dorm, has rooms like prison cells, perfect boxes behind three doors, all of which a paranoid bathroom-mate can lock, and the village is the furthest north of all. While this provides us walking-access to Songsvann, a lake, it limits our time to spend in town
A startling number of things said begin with "In America..." and end not with a question mark but a period.

Even simple, possibly obvious phrases are only so because of familiarity. A girl I knew was complaining that all the people around her were drunk, so I told her, "That's the best time for you to go and fuck with them." There was a silence on the phone, and I said, "Oh, I mean, mess with them. Play tricks on them."

"Oh," she said, laughing. "I would hope so."

Most of these "24 hour party people" I only see with drinks in their hands, and even though I keep seeing them, they become permanent acquaintances. Kringsjå, my dorm, may contain a good deal of the international students, huddling together on the edge of the city, but how much can you share with the people who never remember your name, and you theirs? How important will the friends I make here be when I'm gone, if most I make are for the simple comfort of familiar language and continent? A girl named Sarah from South Carolina and I organized a trip together to Stockholm, and we discuss things we miss in America, like Fred Meyers and Wal-Marts, though I've never been to the east coast. Europeans listening in might get their false impression of America's size from encounters like this.

I started to think maybe it was just the beer that was causing the questioning, so I went back inside, beginning to freeze by the onset of autumn in Norway, one of the coldest countries in the world when it wants to be. There was loud music, though the other people on the floor were apparently undisturbed. A friend had ripped off his shirt and was grabbing a girl to dance with him in the middle of the floor. When I came back in, "Knockin' On Heaven's Door" came on, and he was instantly on the table, singing along with a friend. He pulled me up onto a chair, being too tall to stand straight, and together we gave a show for the entire party. These people may only result in permanent acquaintances, and it may be a shame not to meet a lot of Norwegians during my time in Norway, but I could think of much less enjoyable ways to spend my time.

With easy, uninteresting classes, and dwindling money as the American dollar steadily falls, I often took the subway home and would occasionally wonder to myself, "Why am I here? What am I trying to accomplish? What was the point of all this?" Just to waste time while I wait for my degree? But I stop myself and try to remember, before I came here, I knew nothing of Europe, I had no idea what Oslo would be like, and I was getting progressively frustrated by all the problems everyone had with America, including how the country was conducting itself. I was even recommended to sew a Canadian flag on my own bag before leaving. I try to compare my life before leaving with my life and experiences now, though there really is no comparison.

Even if only for a semester, I staked out a place in Europe. What had once been a land people talked about like a history lesson was now my residence. I had become a citizen, if only temporarily. It may not have been the center of culture it is considered to be by those with the money to visit, and those with the attention and objectivity to study, but it's still quite an adventure for anyone who has never left the States.

And I know it'll be hard to stop talking about when I return, hard to forget in a few years, and hard to stay away from when I'm looking for a real job and a house.
The only traveling I’ve so far done in Norway was with the intent to leave Norway.

Norwegians may be hard to come by in Kringsjå, but I had a few in my buddy group, and as the group of assigned friends transfigured hazily and nearly undetectably to a group of real friends, it took little time to meet a few more. By the time Amanda, my best friend here, and myself organized a trip to Copenhagen, it was only Norwegian natives accompanying us. Normally, there were so few Norwegians around our parties, that if they heard the native language being spoken, it was undoubtedly meant for them and them alone. During our weekend in Copenhagen, it was reversed; if the group split and Amanda and I went different directions, the only English spoken was for our benefit, usually being directed at us.

While the history of Europe is inescapable as we perused museums, statues, and foreign rulers governed them for four hundred years. They were allowed to flourish and develop their own path. Even the simple act of walking to the hotel from the train station revealed an amusement park and hideously pink/orange/yellow building housing all the latest movies, as well as a centuries-old church on the street corner, and a pillar adorned with four angelic statues placed smack in the middle of a main road. Exploring yielded more of the emotionless statues and busts of renowned figures, as well as the famous Little Mermaid and my favorite statue, a woman in a chariot whipping four bulls ready to stampede out of their fountain and down the street.

What hesitations and reservations I have about my life here is a desire for the comparative simplicity of my life beforehand. Traveling Denmark reminded me of my trip across the States in 2006. When I was traveling from Louisiana into eastern Texas, I was struck with a sudden pang of desire for a part of my childhood. When I visited my father in Texas I was exposed to the Texan way of life and politics, the general attitude toward life that was so heavily supported you could feel it in the air. This includes the simplicity of relying on Christian ideals, the manners of a southern gentlemen, the attraction of a ranch, and the desire for a huge truck to assist in the satisfaction of getting one's own hard work done. In the same way, I think it would be nice to return to my friends' basement, where we drank every night and I read every day and all I needed was a job for rent and food. Europe was only a place talked

about for those pursuing culture, open-mindedness, and a delicious spin on life in the States. I'm forced to relinquish my homesickness to this realm of laziness and oafish simplicity; I tried to stop thinking about the matter before I left for Copenhagen, and still try to remind myself now that when I go home, it will not be the same.

Denmark is much cheaper. A restaurant dinner in Oslo will run between $25 and $60 American. With casual gaiety my friends and I went out for lunch and dinner, legs tired from standing and walking all day. In the cheapness of Denmark, I eagerly dove into a pizza that could smother a man, for pocket change. Still, the most noteworthy food consumed by me in my entire time was found behind a glass counter in a coffee shop. Amongst all the other desserts it sat, waiting. Neither the most sugary, flashiest, nor appetizing of the foods, it sat next to the delicate and delicious chocolate cakes. As soon as I saw it, though, I laughed and told the waitress I desired none other. I sat down in the backless concave stools, and geared for irony. I ate a Danish. In Denmark.

We went all over Copenhagen, mostly walking, but our final trip took us the furthest, clear across the city. When I had asked people what I should attempt to see, the most common answer was along the lines of, “Christiania! Oh, well, actually it's getting torn down...But you should try to see it anyway!” It was our final night, and our plane left early the following morning, but all of our remaining party expressed interest in going to see the site. After a full dinner, we set off across the city, walking for over an hour with only one destination. It was impossible to miss: a large gap in the building line along the street, all lights extinguished except for what could be seen at the entrance. There stood an old bent wooden sign on two tall posts, like the entrance to a carnival or fun park. In green letters was simply painted, “Christiania.”

Christiania is mainly seen as a small independent community with its own laws, similar to what the hippies were trying to accomplish in the Haight-Ashbury region. Until recently, this was mostly allowed to thrive by the Danish police, even though hard drugs illegal in Copenhagen found temporary homes there, and hash was, also until recently, sold on the street in stalls. While the community has had its share
of problems in the past, its small size allows an easy banding together to expel unwanted presences quickly and efficiently. Christiania still retains its rules of outlawing guns, cars, and cameras, with large signs on Pusher Street making this order extremely clear. Recently, an impression has been made of a dislike toward newcomers and the desire to force them out. The police, under direction of the current right-wing government, have become increasingly agitated with the drug attention Christiania produces. When the police tried to make arrests, stones and even Molotov cocktails were used. Currently, the future of the place is in doubt.

We walked to this place, so quiet and still that it was as though I'd suddenly turned deaf. Fences and pavement gave way to bushes and dirt. The dusty brown paths led us easily and naturally along a semi-circle of shops either deserted or closing up. One specialized in weed pipes and bongs, ranging from beautiful and ornate to simple, cheap, and effective. Another was a modern and brightly lit food stand at home anywhere in Copenhagen but here. A crossroads was nearby, visible only because two garbage cans were aflame, lighting the way, and providing heat for those free enough to stop and appreciate the warmth. We all walked on. On Pusher Street, buildings had been branded with the thick red circle with a cross, outlawing cameras. Though I had forgotten to bring mine, I was disappointed. Perhaps it was because I had spent the last four days as an unabashed tourist, and figured some small part of Christiania would live on in my camera, even if it were torn down the following day.

We continued silently, in awe of not only the dramatic change that had taken place in a few steps, but at least for my part, the sheer notion of what a place like this must have been in its heyday. Scant buildings stood along the road, most without doors, stairs leading up into dark lairs, the contents of which we could only imagine. A group of people were in the first floor laughing loudly, their dancing shadows suggesting no electricity. A man stood in front of them speaking rapidly in Danish, pausing only to punctuate his story with his own brief chuckles. The area felt more open; no two buildings were adjacent, trees sprouted and thrived everywhere, hiding the city Christiania sat in the middle of. They concealed a church, enormous by the standards of the area, and did it so well I hadn't known the church was there until we were right up next to it. The intimacy was inescapable.

On Pusher Street, as with the rest of Christiania, there are no street lamps. A bar seemed the only thing still alive, as if the world was turning off all its lights, telling us to go home, that Copenhagen was closed for the day, yet there was still one merry group of revelers ignoring the polite but not so subtle suggestion. "Revolution 1" by the Beatles shouted out the door. Christianites scattered around the entrance took no notice of us walking into the all-wooden bar. The bar itself, the floor, the chairs, everything had a painstakingly not-mass-produced feel since almost nothing was metal. The tables appeared stolen from a park, and the jukebox was invisible to all but the patrons. Beer was cheaper here than most places, and we all sat down with one, and then two. None of us talked as it switched into more Beatles, then Clapton, then Stevie Ray Vaughn. People swayed with their own beat; a man serenaded a woman out onto the dance floor, which was just the open area near the door, she leaned in close to me, he gave me a jokingly stern look, and then whisked her away to her seat where they repeated the process. A man with either yellow or missing teeth and thinning, balding hair clapped in tune, smiling and laughing, as if he were trying to sing along, but had forgotten the words. The other patrons mostly drank and danced, but by not turning to anyone but their party, kept exclusively to themselves. I could understand. Perhaps they weren't interested in talking to us or they thought we looked like people trying to take their place, cut off a part, and make it our own. The world around this place had gone dark, but there was no indicator of fatigue or resignation inside the comforting realm of the bartender, his cheap beer, the dance floor, the jukebox, and the friends that even a newcomer could see had been coming here for years. It was a beer I hope I never forget.

Walking out, finally, a woman took up an acoustic guitar, and was singing an original composition in Danish. I stopped and listened a moment as I waited for the others with me to catch up, and in that time she finished. It wasn't a particularly complex song, just a simple chord progression, and the lyrics weren't terribly beautiful from what I could understand, but all those just outside the bar's door, smoking or not, began to clap. I thought it might have been from courtesy, because it wasn't terribly enthusiastic, but it felt genuine. I like to think they were clapping not because the song was beautiful or mind-blowing, but because the song was played.

On the way out, we passed the welcoming sign once again, and on the reverse side it said, "Now entering the EU."

In some odd way, I felt I didn't know Denmark from exploring its various attractions, cultural features, museums, or even the ruins of the oldest castle built roughly a thousand years ago. I found my connection to this place through navigating the streets and recognizing restaurants or buses. The main street, busier and longer than
Speaking to other Americans is scary now, since Charleston seems like it's in my own backyard, and if I'm in America, how could I not pop over for a visit? As I need to remind Europeans of the sheer vastness of the States, I also need to remind myself.

Karl Johan's Gate, was thrilling to walk down. On this street I could see people filtering out from one end to another as they chose their respective destinations. It was like they were filing off the last train for the night, until this suffocating crowd dispersed into a handful of unknowns. I felt most exhilarated as I guided our group back to our hotel from far away on one of the later nights, and thought to myself, "I know my way around Copenhagen." And in some way, it made everything feel worthwhile. Every dollar spent to get here, every kroner spent to maintain my presence in Europe, it all seemed worth it, so I could navigate a city I had no connection to. Knowing my way around Seattle is still something I need to work on as I dash in and out with my car on whatever errand has brought me into the city. Here, though, I felt like I could almost blend in, if nothing else, as I walked competently to get groceries, even if the way back led to a hostel.

Now I can only speculate as to the depths at which my current situation, at large, has infiltrated into my psyche. Every thought of Seattle, of Pullman, of my friends in Bellevue or my mother's new house in North Bend, my sister's new apartment and boyfriend, they seem like years ago. I speak now of Copenhagen and Stockholm, Kiel, London, Amsterdam, Prague, not as places distant and heard of, but as stops for a plane, actual locations on land that are just there, over that way, and I can point, all you have to do is go and you'll get there, actually stand in and be inside and see these places that are world-renowned. Speaking to other Americans is scary now, since Charleston seems like it's in my own backyard, and if I'm in America, how could I not pop over for a visit? As I need to remind Europeans of the sheer vastness of the States, I also need to remind myself. The furthest I've been from home before August 3, 2007, is south Mississippi, and home seemed impossibly far. But at this distance, can I actually change? Is there a Schuyler Lystad from Oslo? Who, then, is this tall outgoing fellow who wears crimson and has no car, who once again is having trouble speaking and using correct grammar, for the first time in years, who the natives mistake as one of their own, and who now operates in metric and 24-hour time? What are his plans? What does he want? And who is returning to Seattle in January? Because that person will not be the same one who left.

I find a strange comfort here, as I book my plane back to the States, confirming once and for all I am only going to stay for five months, and not a year like I had originally planned. This is the sign I am finished, done in some way, happened upon what I had expected and now or will by then have finished my work, whatever it is. What little I had known about Europe, especially Norway, was like a Nirvana album stretching to explain Seattle: pitifully under-qualified. I expected to infiltrate this "informed system" people talk about as they search for a model to compare with American politics, no matter the issue. The filter always catches the problems and the realities, the details you remember about a place, but never the words to describe, the faults that make it real. The filter holds them back, making it a dreamland. What I found was land and the people who lived there. And they have different ideas about how a life is run, but not that different. I'm still unable to describe what I was looking for, but at this point I feel I've gotten the answer. I may not have played with this toy much, or gotten to understand its function, but I've removed the glossy shrink-wrapping. Here stands Oslo, my home for five months.