

Five Ports for Rollo

Bells woke me up.

I could hear their deep, methodical ringing through my hotel room's closed and curtained windows. It's one of my favorite sounds in the world, so I rose quickly from the bed, fumbled the curtains aside, and pulled a window open. I caught the last three chimes. I closed my eyes as the reverberations faded away. Having staggered into the bed only three hours earlier after a disastrous day of travel, the sonorous bells revived my exhausted spirits. It was exactly what I needed. City



sounds filled my ears now, a steady murmur of traffic punctuated by the brakes of a bus or truck. I opened my eyes to a large square speckled with people in the early light. A stream of riders on bicycles flowed along the wide boulevard below my window. Copenhagen. I was in Europe! But just barely. A canceled first flight in Albuquerque, New Mexico, followed by a delayed connection in Dallas, followed by a mistimed connection by the airline resulting in a seven-hour layover in Heathrow airport, followed by an hour-long wait in the nearly empty Copenhagen airport to report lost luggage, followed by a lonely vigil for a train downtown conspired to push my arrival at the hotel bed to 3 am. The bells washed it all away.

My room with a view

I was here! I searched the stately buildings that surrounded the square for the source of the ringing but without success. I wanted to say *thank you* to someone for the bells. They felt like the proper way to start a two-week trip.

And a whole new chapter in my life.

I could see people entering a chain coffee store across the square, which meant it was open. That's all I needed to know. I threw my rumpled clothes back on, caught the elevator, and stepped outside. The soft air embraced me like an old friend. I crossed the street and entered the square, soaking up the Old World ambiance that surrounded me. The square seemed to bask in the peace and quiet of the early morning, as did I. It was mid-summer day, 2023, so I knew it was the start of a sixteen-hour run of daylight – just as I had planned. One of my goals when designing the trip was to use the long daylight to see as much as possible, though I didn't expect to be operating on so little sleep the first day, thus the beeline for caffeine and the chain store. I love European coffee and normally wouldn't go near the ubiquitous American brand, but at this hour I didn't appear to

have a choice. Moments later, cappuccino in hand, I drifted into an adjacent street to count my blessings. I was in Europe. I had coffee. More importantly, I was still in one piece emotionally. For a while over the winter, I had my doubts.

I strolled down the street, which doubled as a shopping mall and would soon be filled with people. I love European streets in the dawn hours. Everything feels fresh and renewed, ready for the day – feelings I craved now. It had been a miserable winter. The death of my wife, Gen, from cancer in early October had punched a gaping hole in my life. In July 2021, after fifteen years of treatments for a rare type of cancer called neuroendocrine tumors, she needed heart surgery to replace infected valves. The surgery and recovery went well but over the winter the tumors began to spread unexpectedly. Gen started on chemo pills in February, but the tumors kept spreading. In July, she stopped taking the drugs when it became clear they weren't being effective. Her doctor asked if she understood the meaning of her decision. She did. Me too. I cried in the car, but Gen remained stoic. In August, I began doing all the hospice for her at our home near Santa Fe as her health faded. On a beautiful, sunny September afternoon, we took a drive so she could see her beloved New Mexico once more. Two weeks later, I held her hand as she died.



Gen

I made it through Gen's memorial ([collected as an essay](#)) in November and the holidays in December with the help of our children, Sterling and Olivia, and many hugs and tears. It was so good to have them back in the house, however briefly. I got to be a parent again when Sterling caught the flu over the holidays. After their departure, however, a solitude settled into the house alongside grief. My only companion was our ten-year-old fluffy lap dog, Squidgy. I was grateful for her presence, but she couldn't dent the silence that filled most of my hours now. I saw friends, did things in town, and kept busy with writing and work, which filled the long days and nights and kept my mind focused on the present instead of the past. The snow kept coming, however, and winter dragged on. We usually burn a lot of wood in our iron stove to keep the house warm, but it became a four-cord winter, the most ever. I was happy to chop wood when it was four of us, then just the two of us. Now, it was a chore. And lighting a fire just for myself made me feel lonely. One night, I decided I needed a summer trip to revive my spirits.

I knew where to go.

After a necessary nap back at the hotel, I headed out into the streets of Copenhagen again. Randomly zig-zagging, I eventually found myself standing outside a royal palace. It didn't look particularly old, but it was pretty, so I pulled out my phone for a photo. Nearby, I spied a statue of



Royal dude, Copenhagen

a dude on horseback, looking regal and authoritarian. A king, I assumed, though I didn't know who. That was one reason why I was in Copenhagen at the start of a trip through Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Other than a brief trip to southern Norway in October 2017 to give a talk and hike to a rock overlooking a fjord, Scandinavia was *terra incognita*. I wanted to fill in the blanks. Olivia did a mid-summer visit to Copenhagen during her college-abroad semester in Berlin and reported it was lovely. After deciding to start in Copenhagen, my wheels began to turn. As the family knows, I love planning trips, where to stay, what to see. Very sadly, the planning wouldn't include Gen. That was hard to accept on many levels, but it was also another reason to go.

I needed to figure out what *solo* meant out in the world.

As I wandered, raucous gangs of high school graduates roved the busy streets in brightly-colored, balloon-festooned trucks. I assumed at first their boisterous (drunk) celebrations were a deliberate counterpoint to the staid citizens on the streets, but it also looked like nonstop partying. I missed Gen's perspective. She would have had something wry and smart to say about the noisy kids. We could have discussed it over lunch and a beer. I found a restaurant that fronted a busy street and picked a table outside for people-watching, hoping for a distraction from the empty seat across from me. It didn't work. There's something about eating alone that doesn't feel right. A meal is a highly social activity, as it has been for thousands of years. It's a chance to talk, laugh, gossip – all the intimate things humans do over food. Eating alone feels like breaking an ancient ritual. Add grief, and it makes a lonely meal. I comforted myself by watching the crowds and soaking up the conversational sounds of my fellow diners, though I couldn't understand a word. It was the same at Tivoli Gardens, Copenhagen's famous amusement park, where I spent the evening. After checking out the sights, I stayed for a Gay Pride concert that featured a talented singer dressed in drag. It was great fun – but it was hard to watch alone.



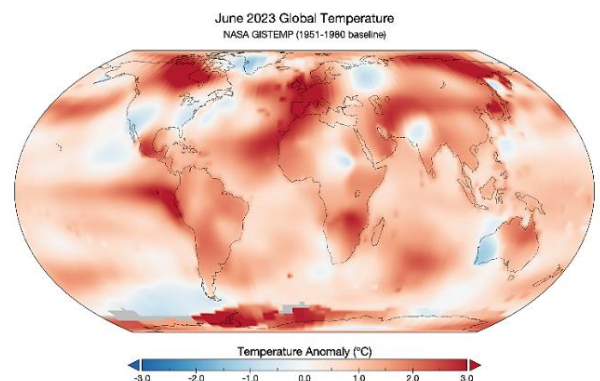
Gay Pride concert at Tivoli

Solo. It was hard to get my mind around the idea – and the fact. Gen and I were together for forty years. We met during Orientation week at the start of our freshman year at Reed College. We dated for the next four years, spending a lot of time in each other’s company on campus and



camping trips. In the spring of 1983, I joined Gen in a house of friends during her final semester at Reed. Our happy cohabitation was brief, alas. Gen went home to New Mexico every summer to work on archaeological projects. After graduation, she worked research jobs around the region for the rest of the year. During a stint in Reno, Nevada, she found a stray dog shivering in the cold. She named him Sutro. I remember her phone call – we had our first family member! In 1985, she enrolled in UCLA’s graduate program in archaeology, and the two of us moved into a tiny apartment on a dead-end street in West Hollywood. It was the formal start to thirty-seven years of living together, a span that included sixteen chickens, five dogs, four houses, and two children. We were rarely apart in all those years.

What to do with this new and unwanted chapter in my life? It was a question I kept asking myself during the depths of winter. In the wake of Gen’s death, I contemplated selling our house, which we had occupied for nearly twenty years, and moving away. But to where exactly? The prospect of being a stranger in a strange city at age sixty-two had limited appeal. I thought about moving near Sterling or Olivia, but I didn’t want to intrude on their busy lives. Besides, I love Santa Fe and I love New Mexico. Why would I leave? Still, it was hard. Memories of Gen and our lives together – we moved to Santa Fe from Los Angeles in 1991 – saturated every place I went. Memories fade, but it was small consolation. There was another factor to consider: climate change. Under rising temperatures and increasingly severe weather, where is the best place to live? I knew from my work that the list of places *not* to live was growing longer by the year: too hot, too humid, too prone to flooding, too close to the ocean, too vulnerable to big fires. Criminal inaction on global warming by government “leaders” and the raging disinterest of fellow citizens despite mountains of scientific data and repeated dire warnings means these conditions will get worse. On cue, June 2023 was the hottest June on record. Sterling



lives in Portland, Oregon, which recently endured record heat as well as choking smoke from wildfires. Olivia lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, which has been stuck in a drought and has tons of humidity. In the end, I decided to stay in my house.

Walking through Copenhagen, I was deeply impressed by the quantity of bicycles I saw. The city is famous for being bike-friendly, so I expected to see a lot of people on two wheels, but I wasn't prepared for the huge amount of bikes parked on sidewalks. I've lived in the American



A sidewalk of bikes

West for nearly my entire life, including Phoenix and Los Angeles where cars rule, so I was primed to be amazed by the bikes, but still – wow! Good for the Danes. My guidebook recommended that visitors take a spin around the city on a rental, and I was tempted briefly. I like bikes, but I'm a walker. It goes back to my youth when I did a ton of hiking and archaeological survey. There's just something about walking: the satisfying feeling of foot meeting the ground; the natural pace of a human stride; and the opportunity to think about things in your life, past and present, while your feet do the work. Also, walking grants you the freedom to go anywhere, anytime. On the downside, you don't get an adrenaline rush putting

one foot in front of another like you do zipping around on a bicycle. I like adrenaline, but I also like to look at things as I go. I suspected there was much to see underneath my feet as I walked through Scandinavia, so I began taking photographs of my shoes against interesting paving patterns, something that Gen liked to do during our travels in Europe. It appealed to both the archaeologist and the artist in her. Doing so on this trip felt like a nice way to honor her.



Pattern #1 (Copenhagen)

The next day, I focused my rambling on parts of the city along the water's edge, starting at the historic Kastellet, a pentagram-shaped fortress built in the 17th century to protect Copenhagen from attack by the neighborhood bully, Sweden. It was pretty, but rather dull. I kept walking. I had already decided to skip the royal palaces on my journey through the region. Unlike previous trips, I wasn't in the mood anymore for the gilded excesses of the elite class, even though their 'homes' were spectacular bits of historical architecture. The bad behavior of the ruling classes over the centuries, particularly those involved in vast wealth accumulation via colonial exploitation and the

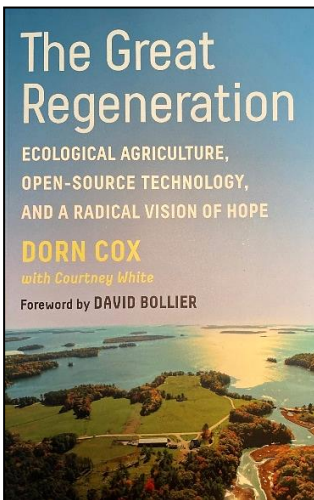
slave trade, had been much in the news. Official apologies were being issued by European governments and there was talk of reparations – long overdue. Going into a royal palace felt like a tacit acceptance of the injustice embedded in its stones and chandeliers. The world had changed. Me too. I preferred the sights and sounds of people outside enjoying a pretty day. I walked to the popular Nyhavn district for lunch. An old harbor, Nyhavn is filled with colorful buildings, busy restaurants, and tourists. I found a small table amidst a throng of fellow lunch-goers and settled in for another civilized meal. Eating outside in Europe ranks near the top of my favorite things to do. I missed Gen, though it was better this time, my soloness eased a bit by a chatty waitress.



A lovely day in Nyhavn

There was another reason to travel to Scandinavia. Gen’s death in 2022 followed hard on the heels of a decision I made to call it a career after forty years (see my essay [Under The Glacier](#)). I had been seeking creative answers to anguished questions about land and people since my teenage years (explained in [The Jaguar’s Teeth](#)). After college, I became involved in conservation work,

initially focused on protecting public lands. Frustrated with my fellow activists and their stuck-in-the-mud attitudes, in 1997 I cofounded the nonprofit Quivira Coalition with a progressive rancher. Our mission was to improve land health and build ecological and economic resilience by enlarging a *radical center* of ranchers, environmentalists, scientists, and others. We were pioneer advocates for what is today called [regenerative agriculture](#). Our work grew to include nature-based solutions to climate change. I began [writing books](#). In 2016, I left Quivira to write full-time, including coauthorship of four books, one each with a farmer, a rancher, a natural fiber expert, and a well-known author and climate activist. However, **while traveling on a train from Berlin to Prague on July 25, 2019, Gen and I endured a record-smashing heat wave that drained my**



My final ‘career’ book

spirits (see [The Heat Wave](#)). Add President Trump and the Covid-19 pandemic and by July 2022 I was exhausted. No more save-the-world books, I decided. I’m an author, however. After Gen’s death, I realized I needed new writing project – which is where Scandinavia came in.

I decided to chase a famous viking.

I'll explain. On my 60th birthday in 2020, I began researching my family tree. Actually, it was a family *branch*: my paternal grandmother Elizabeth Lacy. Years earlier, my aunt Sara Lacy gave me a sheath of documents that traced an unbroken line of male Lacys from Elizabeth's dad back to brothers Walter and Ilbert de Lacy who fought at the Battle of Hastings alongside William the Conqueror. I was dubious at first, but a detailed genealogy of the Lacys published by a distant relative appeared to confirm the link. Then I got on the Internet. Wow. I felt like I had been hit by a firehose of genealogical information. What I uncovered not only corroborated the link to Walter and Ilbert de Lacy but traced them back to their hometown of Lassy, in central Normandy, France, not far from William the Conqueror's hometown of Falaise. It wasn't hard to imagine their families interacting. I kept digging. Soon, I discovered I was a direct descendent of the Conqueror himself, as are many millions of people around the world.

I knew my branch of the Lacys were deep Southerners, starting in south Arkansas, then over to the hill country of South Carolina, then back to colonial Virginia, close to Jamestown. While rooting on the Internet, I came across a PDF of President George W. Bush's lineage that traced a branch of his family to William the Conqueror. A third of the way, President Bush and I shared a common ancestor: Mary Aston, born in 1629 in Charles County, Virginia. Her father was Lieutenant Colonel Walter Aston, who emigrated from Staffordshire, England, in 1627 aboard the ship *James*, "bringing with him foodstuffs and tobacco pipes." The Astons were part of the English aristocracy, which is how President Bush and I make our way back to William the Conqueror. Two of William's children produced thirty-six grandchildren, including our ancestor King Henry I, who was responsible for twenty-five himself! Marriage among the aristocracy was tightly controlled and carefully documented. From William the Conqueror, a well-documented genealogical path to his great-great-great grandfather: an enterprising viking leader named Rollo.

My 35th great-grandfather.

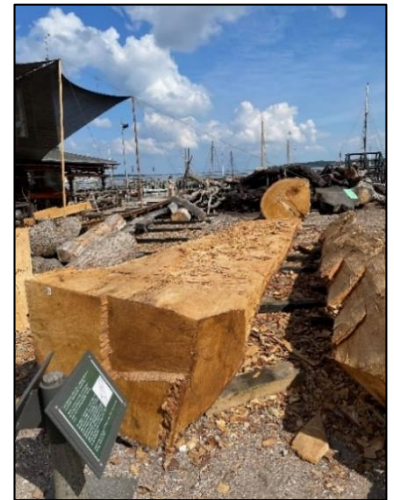
The next morning, I boarded a train for the city of Roskilde, a short ride from Copenhagen. Young people flowed into the compartment with me, wearing backpacks, ear buds, and smiles. Where were they all going? I did a quick search. Ah. An annual rock music festival in Roskilde. That sounded like fun. Reaching our destination, the young folk went left while I turned right, starting a leisurely walk to the famous Viking Ship Museum. It features five ships deliberately sunk around 1070 AD to block part of the fjord that led from the ocean to Roskilde, a hub of trade routes at the time. The city was founded in 980 AD by Harald Bluetooth, King of Denmark, but it



Roskilde Cathedral

was likely a busy port long before Harald made his kingly appearance. It served as the capital of Denmark from 1050 or so to 1443 when royal favor shifted to Copenhagen though Roskilde Cathedral continues to be the burial ground for nation's royalty. I went to Roskilde to see the viking ships, as well as the harbor where Rollo might have set sail more than a thousand years ago. Might have. No one knows for sure. In the late 8th century, vikings began sailing from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway in search of plunder, commencing a campaign of violence and death across Europe that became fodder centuries later for countless television shows. One of the vikings was Rollo, who arrived in what is today Normandy around 900 AD and changed the course of history. Rollo's origin is a source of much speculation. Was he Danish? He did leave from Roskilde? Or another port in Scandinavia? I wanted to search and learn, so I built my trip around visiting five possible ports.

As soon as I entered the museum grounds I missed Gen. In addition to the five viking boats neatly displayed in a large building, the museum is a living laboratory for ship-making viking-style, which she would have loved to witness. It's a discipline called *experimental archaeology*, where modern experts try to revive long-lost techniques by reproducing an ancient object such as a pot, sword, or ship using science and their own hands with the goal of getting as close to the original as possible. It's a way of achieving a deeper understanding of the many physical processes involved, but it also allows the experts to get inside the heads of the long-



The start of a viking longboat



Viking ship-building expert

gone people by solving problems they had to solve, such as creating a viking longboat from scratch. Over the years, museum staff and volunteers successfully constructed life-size replicas of the viking boats that were sunk in the fjord and sailed them around the harbor. They even sailed one from Roskilde all the way to Dublin, Ireland, the longboat's original home. That must have been a thrill! Wandering the grounds, I marveled at the skill of the viking shipwrights and their modern-day counterparts. Then I took a ride on a boat myself. Joining twenty other visitors, we took a

spin in one of the reconstructed viking boats. It was great fun. Under the supervision of museum staff, we rowed cheerfully if clumsily into the harbor. After stashing the oars, we helped set the canvas sail. As we cruised along, I tried to imagine what a long ocean voyage would have been like. Dangerous and tedious. Cramped and exhausting. Despite the sail, vikings spent much of their time rowing. The perilous crossing to England would have taken roughly three weeks depending on the weather, demonstrating that the vikings were peerless sailors as well.



Sailing in a viking boat

Back on land, I headed for the museum café. I needed coffee and a sandwich. I settled at a table in the mostly empty patio, under blazing blue skies. Moments later tears came. I missed Gen. This is exactly the sort of adventure we did together for so many years – go to new places, share experiences, walk, talk, laugh. We were many things in our long relationship, including great travel buddies. Gen was cheerfully game for anything I cooked up for us, long days, long drives, one more church or castle. Once, she negotiated us out of a disaster at a tollbooth in rural France by using her rusty college French to ask impatient drivers



Gen in Tuscany

behind us to back up. There were many more wonderful travel stories. She wasn't here to share the boat ride with me like days past, but I couldn't text her either or send photographs. That's what triggered the tears. She wasn't here, and she wasn't there. One of the hardest things to accept about death is knowing that you will never see that person again, ever. My brain couldn't process that fact in the months following her death, not after forty years together. She wasn't at work, in town, at home, or on a trip. She wasn't going to walk in the door or answer her phone or respond to an email or text. My tears stopped after a while. Solo is hard. There aren't any manuals. You make things up as you go along. How to occupy an empty house. How to eat meals alone. The loss of daily conversations. Shopping for one. Struggling with the flu on my own. Traveling solo. Sitting in the café, I realized it wasn't simply a matter of coping or adjusting to my new reality. I needed to find a new way of being. One port at a time.



My next stop was Stockholm. I arrived by train late in the afternoon on another beautiful day. Preferring to walk as usual, I clacked my luggage down the busy streets to the hotel, located near Nybroviken, a small bay close to the city center. Stockholm occupies a complex archipelago of islands, waterways, bays, and mainland. It is strategically located at the point where freshwater Lake Mälaren to the west meets the salt water of the Baltic Sea. Nestled deep in the splintered east coast of Sweden, the city was easy to defend historically. I liked Stockholm immediately. There were tons of trees, islands, and colorful buildings. After throwing my things into the hotel room, I headed down to the port and walked the length of the long promenade, soaking everything up. The silky harbor was filled with boats of all types: water buses and taxis, sightseeing ships, dinner cruises, floating restaurants, yachts, and patrol boats. There was a solitary fishing vessel. Walking back on the promenade and looking for a place to eat, I kept pinching myself – I was in Stockholm! I chose a restaurant close to the water’s edge mostly because of the sign above the entrance that read: “We Do Not Have WiFi. Talk to Each Other!” Ah, Europe.

I walked 35,000 steps the next day – and developed a heat rash above both ankles to prove it. I couldn’t help myself. Once I started wandering, I couldn’t stop. After breakfast I headed toward the old quarter, navigating the rush-hour traffic, which being Scandinavia, included waves of bicyclists. I took a brief break on the pedestal of a statue honoring King Gustav III, another royal, white, slave trading-supporting imperialist. Gustav’s distinction comes from being shot at midnight on March 16, 1792, while attending a masked ball at the Opera House. The murderers were aristocrats unhappy with the king for curtailing some of their elite privileges. Resuming my walk, I reached my destination: Gamla Stan, Stockholm’s stylish medieval quarter. It’s stylish because like every medieval center I’ve visited in Europe it has become a trendy outdoor shopping mall. When Gen and I visited Venice, Italy, in 2008 – my first trip to Europe since a high school visit to the United Kingdom in 1976 – I was shocked at first by the commercialism. Tourist shops lined every street. How many handbags and scarves did people need? Fortunately, the shock wore off under the relentless charm of Venice. Gen and I wandered everywhere over three memorable days. I fell in love with the city, and Europe by extension, particularly its medieval quarters. It’s a love affair that continues.



Selfie with king



Gamla Stan

Located on a small island, Gamla Stan is compact. It didn't take long to wander all the streets and lanes, even with generous breaks for coffee and ice cream. It was also very charming, aided by the lack of crowds at that early hour. When I emerged from the last street, I decided to do it all over again. This time, I ducked into a few shops, even though there was no one at home to buy gifts for anymore. It was an odd feeling. After years of present-buying for Gen and the kids, anticipating their delight, I spent my time now admiring craftsmanship. For a while, the family took up knitting and I made a point of bringing back exotic yarn from sheep ranches or farm stores during my travels

for the Quivira Coalition. Now, I just look. I don't need more stuff. I am content to take photos home. Finishing my second ramble, I settled in for a round of people-watching from a perch on a cement block in the old square. A short distance away was the Nobel Prize Museum, looking incongruous. The day grew warm, and the square soon filled with people. Tour groups appeared magically. One guide holding a yellow flag halted his group nearby and told the story of the Stockholm Bloodbath. The year was 1520. The reigning royal imperialist authoritarian was King Christian II, a Dane who had invaded Sweden and besieged Stockholm. As punishment for their resistance, dozens of the city's leading aristocrats, merchants, and clergy were shepherded into the square and beheaded. Rivers of blood ran down the streets, the tour guide said cheerfully. He waved his yellow flag and the group moved on.

I moved on too. After a ramble around a clutch of royal buildings, stopping only for photos of my feet, I explored the islands of Skepps and Kastell, once the leisuring grounds of Swedish royals, noble elites, Navy officers, and now tourists. I walked to Kastell's farthest point and sat on a bench where I munched on rolls I had kept from the breakfast buffet at the hotel. Across the water was the *Vasa*, a warship ordered into existence in 1626 by King Gustavus Adolphus to serve his imperialist ambitions in the Baltics. King Gustavus demanded that extra cannons be placed on the ship. They were crowded onto the upper decks making it unstable. On its maiden voyage, the *Vasa* sailed just 1,400 yards before capsizing. Today, the salvaged ship is a huge draw for tourists, though not for me. Too much authoritarian war-mongering for my tastes. I kept walking.



Pattern #2 (Stockholm)

I aimed for Skansen, an open-air folk museum featuring pre-industrial buildings collected around Sweden in the late 19th century. To reach the entrance I passed the popular ABBA museum, dedicated to the ubiquitous pop musical icons of the late 1970s. I remember ABBA from my high school days. I sped up. I was feeling better. The walking, the fresh air, and the attractiveness of



Pattern #3 (Stockholm)

the city were working in a healing way. I'm energetic and self-propelled and have been that way since I can remember, so staying busy has not been hard since Gen's death. I had some experience with soloness in my life as well. My adolescence was dominated by my mother, Joyce, who was unhappy and unpredictable, abetted by a sleeping pill addiction. After a series of embarrassing incidents, my father decided it would be best if no one came to our house. Period. No sleepovers. No colleagues for supper. No holiday visits from family. I was very social at school, but at home I had to entertain myself, spending long hours playing board games alone and making up fun things to do with chums who weren't

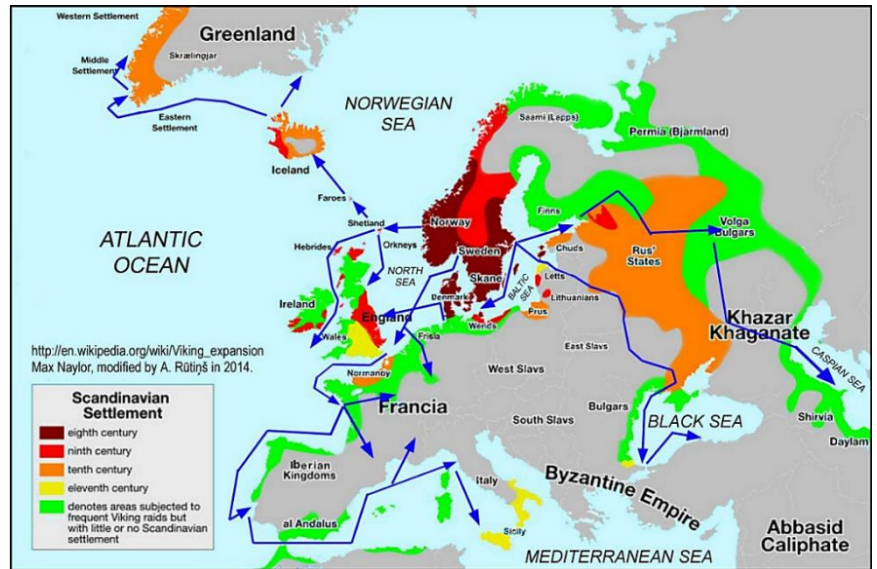
there. It stimulated my imagination and helped with loneliness, but it also sucked. That's a big reason I bonded with Gen so well – she was such good company! Now, I had to be my own company again, exercising memory muscles along with my legs.

It was time to get serious about vikings, so I started the next day with a visit to the National History Museum, curious about the Swedish take on the viking story. In popular culture, vikings are depicted as ferocious warriors bent on plunder and glory. The TV shows are not wrong. Plunder was a main reason vikings hazarded perilous ocean crossings in their sturdy but exposed boats beginning in 793 AD with a famous raid on Lindisfarne monastery in England. Their initial targets were religious houses in England, Scotland, and Ireland, which were full of coins and silver objects donated to them by wealthy benefactors. As news spread about the easy booty, the number of vikings boats hitting the seas rose quickly. Alas, the plunder included human slaves. Lots and lots of slaves. Ignored in the TV dramatizations, the acquisition of human chattel was a primary objective of viking raids and military campaigns. None of this was a fluke. Raiding, plunder-seeking, and the kidnapping, sale, and exploitation of human slaves were pillars of the viking economy and culture and had been for a long time.



Lindisfarne raid

There was another reason vikings hit the waves that is often overlooked by popular culture: in some places they came to stay. Eastern Europe, for example. The ‘Rus’ in ‘Russia’ is likely derived from an archaic Finnish word for ‘Sweden.’ Beginning in the 9th century, Swedish vikings called Vangarians began settling along the river routes to the Black and Caspian Seas. The Vangarians eventually



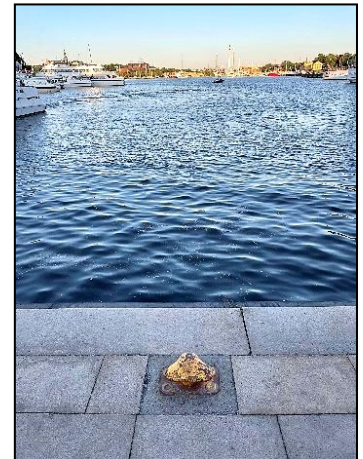
Where the vikings came from and where they went: note Normandy

formed the state of Kievan Rus which they ruled for a century before being absorbed into local Slavic society. In one of the earliest travelogues ever written, Ahmad ibn Fadlan, a 10th-century Arab ambassador and traveler, described the Rus this way: “They are as tall as a date palm, blond and ruddy so that they do not need to wear a tunic nor a cloak; rather the men among them wear garments that only cover half of his body and leaves one of his hands free.” He was not as admiring, however, of their hygiene which he called shameless and disgusting. Vikings made their way to Constantinople, where Byzantine Emperors assembled them into the Vangarian Guard, an elite unit dedicated to the Emperor’s protection. So many men began leaving Sweden to join the Guard that a law was passed to curb their emigration!

The museum exhibit noted that the vikings didn’t call themselves ‘vikings.’ The word’s origin is unclear. As a verb in Old Norse, it meant something like “to raid.” As a noun, it meant “pirate.” As a description of a people, the word ‘viking’ became popular in the 13th century, largely from the famous Icelandic sagas, which featured daring viking voyages and bloody family feuds. Contemporaries called them *norsemens* or more often *danens* (i.e., pagans). Vikings began settling England in 850 AD when they founded Jarvik – today known as York. Britons and others violently resisted their attempts at colonization. Nevertheless, viking colonies took root in parts of Iceland, Greenland, Russia, England, and France. One of the most consequential was Normandy – the land of the Northmen. Normans would have an outsized impact on French, English, and Italian history for centuries, from William the Conqueror (progenitor of the British royal family) to kings of

Jerusalem. Normandy was unusual in that it came into existence by treaty, not conquest. In 911 AD, the King of France, Charles the Simple, exhausted by constant plundering and sacking by vikings decided to try a different strategy. Instead of paying off his tormentors with gold to go away as usual, he agreed to a deal with a clever viking leader who wanted land instead. His name was Rollo. In exchange, Rollo promised the king to protect the realm from further viking depredations. It was a colossal mistake by Charles. Defying the odds, the viking colony prospered and expanded. France would not regain Normandy for three hundred years.

After the museum, I wandered through Stockholm pondering what I had learned. It is still a bit of a mystery to scholars why vikings did what they did. Plunder, slaves, gold, fame-seeking, and land acquisition were all good reasons to climb into a longboat with a sword and shield and hit the waves. Other theories include economic distress at home, not enough eligible women, and the rise of a new type of government: monarchy. Kings needed booty to fill royal coffers. Whatever their reasons, I'm glad they went – otherwise I wouldn't be here! I walked to the water's edge near my hotel. Did Rollo leave from Stockholm? Was he a Swede? Not likely. Swedish vikings went east to do their thing, not west. Good to know.



Nybroviken harbor

I decided to take a boat ride, this time without a sail. It was a lovely evening for a trip, so I hopped on a boat headed to Vaxholm Island, a popular destination an hour east of Stockholm. I found a quiet place to sit and put my feet up for a change. I watched the world drift by serenely, feeling well. I had been good company for myself today though I missed talking to someone.



Watching the world

That's one of the hardest things about traveling solo, there's no one to review the day's adventures with over a beer. Or a boat ride. Of course, I could post to social media – except I don't do social media. I tried a few platforms early on, but they didn't click. Besides, I hated the idea of wasting my time in the bottomless pit of the Internet (thankfully, in retrospect). As a result, though, I don't have an 'audience' for photos or travel updates, adding to my soloness. It's alright. I'll take the peace-and-quiet.



The next port was Oslo. After an uneventful ride train, I arrived in the Norwegian capital to be confronted with a novel experience: an automated hotel. Walking in the front door, I was greeted by three airport-style electronic kiosks. After a hesitation, I slowly punched my name and confirmation number into one. My reward was a plastic card, which I waved at a sensor near two imposing glass doors. Nothing happened. I tried it again. After a moment, the doors reluctantly opened, acting like the hotel was unenthused about my presence. Perhaps it detected my digital clumsiness and decided I was a generational relic, unworthy of its smart technology. Inside, I saw a solitary employee, a young man sitting on a stool studying his phone with a bored expression. The hotel décor felt like post-pandemic utilitarian. Not sure which way to go at first, I eventually found Building C and took an elevator to my generic, box-like room furnished, I noticed, with the minimum items necessary to get through the night. The window opened to a concrete well pocked with rows of rooms that looked exactly like mine. I couldn't see the sky. I felt like I had moved into a beehive. It was so unlike Europe that I didn't know what to think. At least it was relatively cheap and had a laundromat. And I wouldn't be staying long.

I had deduced from my pre-trip research that Oslo was not as charming as Copenhagen or Stockholm and planned accordingly. I was right. Other than a general Euro-ness, Oslo seemed like any other big city that I had visited, especially the large amount of construction taking place downtown. The weather was glorious, though, and it was still Europe, so I headed out, walking in loops until it was time for supper. It felt like there were fewer tourists and more locals here, but it was hard to be certain because nearly everyone looked the same. Over 80% of the population of Sweden and Norway identify as white. It's 86% in Denmark. I was ready for Scandinavia's homogeneity having been prepped by good friends, one of whom is Danish, but



Busy Oslo

after a week of traveling, it still felt rather jarring. My friends also said that for all of Europe's liberalness and sophistication, an undercurrent of racism runs strong. I knew that immigration issues had recently become volatile on the continent. It's likely to get worse, alas. As the effects of climate change deepen around the world, migration will become a big source of conflict as people seek relief and a better life. It has already started. I didn't want to think about it. I wanted food – so I picked a restaurant named for my daughter, Olivia!



I continued my walk around Oslo the next day, though I spent a bunch of time on my phone. I had declared a news blackout when I left home to lift my mood by dodging the daily assault of grim headlines, sequestering my phone in a pocket where it belonged. Today, however, the U.S. Supreme Court was due to deliver its verdict on President Biden's ambitious plan to reduce student loan debt by \$400 billion. Gen and I had taken out loans for Sterling and Olivia's expensive college educations. So had they. Both had also received Pell Grants, which meant Biden's debt relief plan would be quite helpful to them. The staggering cost of a college education in America is shameful. In much of Europe, including Scandinavia, tuition is *free*. How sensible is that? Olivia got a sense of the possibilities when she enrolled in university classes during her semester in Berlin. Both kids made choices to attend elite American schools but the financial penalty for non-rich kids is harsh. The conservative Supreme Court was unlikely to approve Biden's plan, but I checked my phone anyway as I walked. I was sitting on a bench munching on cashews when the news finally arrived: 6-3 against. No debt relief. I put my phone back into a pocket and decided it was time to think about vikings again.



Pattern #4 (Oslo)



Opera on the Oslofjord

I headed to Oslo's famous opera house, perched on the edge of the *Oslofjord*, a long finger of water pointed at Denmark. Historically, this part of Scandinavia was called *Viken*, which might derive from the Old Norse word *vik*, meaning an inlet. A person hailing from Viken could be called a *viking*. Or it could mean 'someone hiding in an inlet waiting to prey on boats passing by.' Did Rollo leave from Oslo? Possibly. According to the old Norse sagas, Oslo was founded in 1049 AD by Harald Hardrada, King of Norway from 1046 to 1066 (his reign ended abruptly when he died in battle trying to claim the English throne). That's too late for Rollo, who died around 932. Oslo grew out of an older viking settlement, so it's possible Rollo and his buddies climbed into a longboat here. Maybe he was eager to leave his backwater home and try his fortune in a distant land.

It's hard to say anything about Rollo with certainty because we know so few historical facts about the viking. We don't even know his real name. Rollo is a Latin name assigned to him by

Dudo of St. Quentin, a propagandist hired by Rollo's grandson Duke Richard I to write an official history of Normandy's founding. Rollo's original name might have been *Hrólfr*. Or it could be *Hrollaugr*. He might be the *Hrólfr the Walker* mentioned in two 13th-century Norse sagas, so named because the viking was too big for any horse to carry him. The sagas claim that *Hrólfr* was born in Møre, a coastal region of Norway, to a jarl (chieftain) named Rognvald Eysteinnsson. They say he antagonized Harald Fairhair, King of Norway, and had to flee. However, Dudo of St. Quentin wrote that Rollo was Danish and had to flee Denmark after a violent confrontation with its king. In the 19th century, the dispute became testy as Norwegian and Danish historians vied to claim the viking leader as one of their own. Dudo does tell a great story about Rollo (true or not): as a condition of the treaty, King Charles the Simple required Rollo to kiss his royal foot in submission. Proud viking that he was, Rollo refused. When Charles insisted, Rollo commanded another viking to take his place. Lifting the foot, this viking caused the king to topple backward, causing laughter and breaking the tension!



Rollo's tomb in Rouen Cathedral



The next day, I hit the road. The two remaining ports were located on the western coast of Norway, requiring a car and a driving adventure. I was ready. What I wasn't prepared for was the upgraded SUV the rental agency gave me. I drive a 2004 Subaru Outback that Gen and I purchased in 2016. It's a pleasant little car that gets me to where I need to go without any fuss. The SUV practically drove itself. Its complex digital dashboard display made me feel like I was in the cockpit of an F-16 jet. The vehicle constantly barraged me with warnings and instructions: I was driving too fast or too close to the edge of the road. It didn't like it when I strayed across the center stripe or came too close to an object as I backed up. An hour into the drive, a sensor began buzzing at me without pause. I had no idea what was wrong! I pulled over and made an inspection, without luck. Noticing that my pack in the back seat had tipped over, I uprighted it. The buzzing stopped. That's too many sensors. At one point, the SUV warned me it was 'time for a rest.' What a nanny! It did have one great fighter jet feature. The first time I punched the accelerator to pass a vehicle, the SUV leaped forward so powerfully that I nearly veered off the road. I loved it.

After navigating Oslo's suburbs, I settled in for the eight-hour drive to Haugesund, a small city on the edge of the sea. It felt good to be driving long distances again. I came of age with the Interstate highway system in America, which made me feel like I had been born with a steering wheel in my hands. Out West, you didn't think twice about a long drive. Gen felt the same way. We loved road trips, starting in 1980 with a memorable drive from her home in Albuquerque to Portland to start our Junior year at Reed. We camped in national forests and parks, including Yellowstone, and spent a chilly night in my truck somewhere north of Grand Junction, Colorado. The trip told us that travel would be one of our delights together. All true as it turned out, especially the many trips we took as a family with Sterling and Oliva, starting with a mini-van adventure to ranches when they were only three.

There was one journey that Gen would have happily skipped – becoming a cancer patient. She had a type of cancer without a cure, as we learned in 2006 during our first visit to Dr. Wollin at Cedars-Sinai Hospital in LA. There's an old saying that the first day you get news like that is the first day you begin to grieve. Gen refused to grieve. She insisted we turn the whole cancer thing into an adventure. And we did. Train trips to LA with the kids. Disneyland. The beach. Museums. Hotels. Restaurants. Through the many checkups and treatments, Gen remained resilient. In 2014, she enrolled in a major clinical trial involving an experimental drug that had to be flown in from Italy. The medicine was radioactive, requiring everyone to stand in the hall, doctors included, as it was injected into her arm. Its purpose was to retard the cancer's growth. She endured three rounds of treatments over five years. The trial was successful, and the FDA approved the drug,



Gen after a doctor visit in 2008



Gen in Twelfth Night

which made her happy. Over time, however, her spirits began to sink as the cancer journey became less and less of an adventure, especially after Sterling and Olivia left for college in 2017. For fun, she turned to Shakespeare, joining an amateur acting ensemble, and organizing a reading group. A month before her heart surgery in 2021, she performed in *Twelfth Night*. She kept on. In late May 2022, she played the Ghost in *Hamlet*, among other roles. Although it taxed her waning health, she was determined to see the performances through. She died four months later.

I drove through the stark Norwegian outback thinking about journeys. My forty years in conservation happened in tandem with my forty-year relationship with Gen. The two journeys were one for me. My decision to call it a career followed by Gen's death meant I found myself without a journey. I felt like the skipper of a boat who suddenly learn how to sail solo but wasn't sure where to sail to. That I needed to go *somewhere* was never in doubt. It's who I am. The vikings knew where they were going and why. I'm no viking, thankfully, but I was struck on this trip by the power of purpose. It recalled ranchers that I worked with during my years with Quivira. The most successful ranch families had clearly defined goals for themselves and their business. It's the same for nonprofit organizations. Maybe individuals as well. Researchers have linked happiness and well-being to a person's sense of purpose, big or small. For me, that means a journey. Travel itself isn't a purpose. It's a means. But a means to where or what?

Halfway to Haugesund, my thoughts were interrupted by water. Lakes appeared first, followed by snow. Then creeks and waterfalls. Finally, fjords. I needed fjords. The day was cloudy and gray, which matched my mood. The stark landscape was attractive, but it also felt deserted. One of the things I love most about driving around Europe is the random appearance of a watchtower or old home or the odd castle. You never knew what historic building or farm lay around the next bend. Old

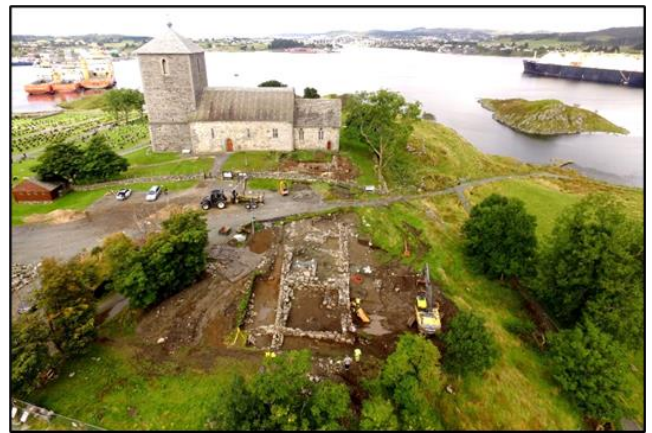


stuff tickles both the archaeologist and the writer in me. What's the story behind that ruined keep? Who lived in that chateaux? How do I get to the spooky castle on the hill? Sometimes, the questions



had unexpected answers. While exploring Tuscany by car, Gen and I decided to visit a villa listed in our guidebook. However, we were met at the villa's entrance by armed guards who told us to turn around, pronto. Driving in Norway was totally different. No spooky castles. I did find a derelict highway bridge spanning a noisy creek, but it dated only to the 1920s. I took a photo anyway. What Norway has in abundance is natural beauty. Every turn of the road seemed to reveal a stunning view. Norway also has fjords. I love fjords. Their majestic serenity can calm jangled nerves, including those weary from a long day of driving solo. I needed their serenity and embraced their solace on a gray day.

The gods smiled on me the next morning. Forecasted rain gave way to glorious sunshine on the drive to Avaldsnes, site of the medieval royal residence of Norway’s first kings. Avaldsnes sits on a hill overlooking a strategic chokepoint on a strait of water connecting a bay to the south with the coast to the north, a route called *Norðvegr* – the North Way – which gave Norway its name. I parked in a gravel lot near Saint Olaf’s church, a handsome stone structure built in 1250 AD by King Håkon IV, who lived in the adjacent royal palace. Not being a church-goer, I wondered why there were so many cars in the parking lot until I saw a well-dressed older couple enter the church. It was Sunday morning, duh!



Excavation at the royal palace of Avaldsnes

The museum wasn’t open yet, so I wandered around, soaking up the benevolence of whichever deity was in charge that morning. The view was bucolic. There were sheep, wildflowers, grass, trees, blue skies, clouds, inlets, and islands, all very tidy and pretty. It was hard to imagine this was the center of Norwegian royal power for centuries. Missing was the palace itself, which deteriorated after the royal seat shifted to Trondheim in 1400. A recent archaeological excavation revealed the residence to be modest in size. Nearby are large burial mounds, some dating back to the Bronze Age. One mound contained a cache of Roman-era weapons, musical instruments, and a necklace of gold.

The museum highlighted the literary side of the Avaldsnes story, a side that unexpectedly resonated with my journey – the sagas. Norse sagas are prose narratives written down from the 12th through the 14th centuries, mostly in Iceland. *Saga* is an Old Norse word meaning “tale.” Sagas had roots in a tradition of oral storytelling in Scandinavia. They were memorized by individuals



Page from an Icelandic saga

to be recited at home, at public gatherings, or at court for jarls and kings. There are five types: *mythical-heroic sagas* recount the deeds of legendary ancestors; *chivalric sagas* feature knights and their daring adventures and many loves; *kings’ sagas* chronicle the lives of Scandinavian kings both real and imagined; *contemporary sagas* focus on everyday life; and *family sagas* feature viking voyages, settlement in

Iceland, genealogies, and tales of violent feuds between family members. Some of the genealogies are so accurate they allow modern-day Icelanders to trace their families back a thousand years to a viking ancestor. That sounded familiar!

Although each type of saga had a different purpose, they shared some common elements: the authors were mostly anonymous; they were written in Old Norse (not Latin); they employed poetry along with prose; they were told from a Christian perspective while admiring the pagan past; and many sagas focused on regular people and their lives, which makes them quite readable. All of them mixed history with fiction so thoroughly that modern scholars find it almost impossible to untangle what is fact and what is not. Take Avaldsnes, for example. According to one saga, the great god Odin himself visited Avaldsnes in 998 AD disguised as a one-eyed old man. He came to tell the current king a tall tale about the legendary King Augvald, founder of Avaldsnes, who ruled many centuries earlier. Augvald united the country by conquest, Odin said admiringly.

It was all explained in the museum. The sagas say the palace at Avaldsnes was the royal residence of King Harald Fairhair, who unified Norway in 872 AD following a glorious naval victory over rivals. They also say it was here that my ancestor Rollo/Hrólf the Walker antagonized Harald, earning banishment. The trouble is King Harald may not have existed! No reliable contemporary source mentions him, and archaeologists can't identify him. He exists chiefly in sagas written three centuries later, becoming a kind of 'King Arthur' of Norway. Did King Arthur of England actually exist? Does it matter? Not really. It demonstrates the power of storytelling. That's what resonated with me in the museum, our need for stories. It wasn't a revelation. I've been telling stories all my life – but it did give me an idea. I'd write a family saga of my own.

Leaving the museum, I headed down a trail to an intriguing cove nestled in the shoreline a stone's throw from the old palace. I could see that it had potential to be a launching spot for viking



The little cove

longboats. I had no idea if the shoreline had changed much in a thousand years. It certainly felt timeless, though the hulking presence of two derelict oil tankers in the water nearby muted the effect. Had there been a port here once? I thought about going back to the museum to ask. I decided to sit on a rock instead. The cove was shallow, which suggested that wooden piers and other structures would have been needed to make a port functional. Of course,

Avaldsnes' harbor could have been located somewhere else. Maybe the vikings beached their boats here on the shore after a successful plundering raid overseas, eager to run up the hill to the palace and tell their king the good news. Either way, the little cove had a strong viking vibe.

For the first time all trip, I felt close to my roots. Whether Rollo left from this spot to start his historic journey – or whether he was even Norwegian – wasn't as important as the vibe I felt. He was part of a culture that stretched back thousands of years, deep into the foggy mists of both archaeology and storytelling. Sitting on my rock, I imagined a vast historical watershed across Scandinavia with individuals and families acting as creeks and streams flowing and merging over time into a river. The misty headwaters of a family's watershed are often obscure, but there comes a point when a stream comes into focus. For me, that's Rollo, and the place was here, at Avaldsnes. It's not a perfect analogy, but one that I prefer over the conventional family 'tree' with its bewildering amount of branches. In ecology, a watershed is dominated by a main channel or river, the remainder are tributaries and creeks. It can be the same in genealogy. Pick a main family river to follow back to its headwaters. The other streams and creeks in your watershed are genealogical tributaries.

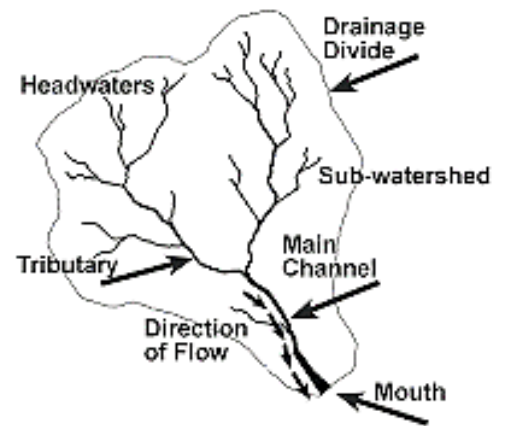


Diagram of a watershed

In my case, the river has a name: *de Lacy*. It is named for my grandmother, Elizabeth Lacy. I can follow the river back nine hundred years to its headwaters in Normandy. Rollo is the river's biggest tributary. I will call it *Rollo Creek*. It rises in Scandinavia, flows through Normandy to England. I knew there were other important tributaries, each packed with saga-worthy stories. There were kings, earls, knights, crusaders, rebellious lords, defiant wives, murderous feuds, mysterious deaths, treachery, adultery, and loads of historic battles. I'm related to sixteen of the twenty-five barons that forced stinky King John to sign the Magna Carta, including John de Lacy (family ties were critical to the rebellion). King John starved two of my ancestors to death. Two others, a mother and daughter, were the first women to be imprisoned in the Tower of London. In America, I have ancestors who survived the Starving Time at Jamestown, greeted the first ship to bring African slaves to our shores, and fought in two battles that turned the tide of the American Revolution in the South. Another nearly died at the Battle of Murfreesboro during the Civil War,

shamefully defending the desire of Southerners to continue buying and selling human beings. The list goes on. As a family saga, it had all the right stuff.

The De Lacy saga.



There was one more port to visit. I climbed back into the SUV and pointed it north. I had reached a truce with the vehicle's nannyiness, allowing me to enjoy the scenery. And what scenery! It felt like I was driving through Valhalla. I drove up the E39, a major highway that hugs Norway's fractured west coast, winding across islands, around inlets, and over huge fjords. Reaching the port



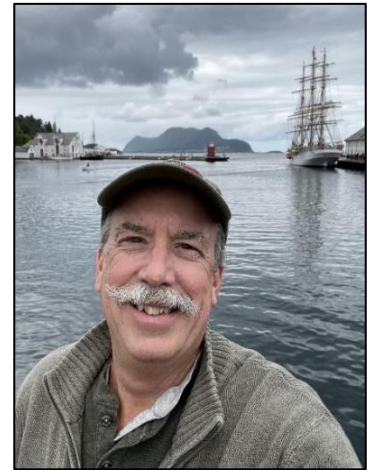
Driving through Valhalla

required four ferries, and two overnight stays. I decided to skip Bergen, a popular tourist destination. The weather had turned drizzly, and I didn't feel like dealing with scarce parking or gangs of people in the rain. I wanted to keep going. I fretted about making a rookie mistake on the ferries, but all went well. Traffic was light, and the E39 smooth. I sailed along, making only two wrong turns that required a GPS consultation with my phone, which I thought was rather good for an old guy!

In mid-afternoon of the third day, I reached my destination – Ålesund, a tiny, colorful port town located in the region of Møre. It sat on a narrow, curved finger of land that sheltered a busy harbor. I discovered just how busy within minutes of climbing stiffly out of the SUV. I ran straight into an artery of people filling both sidewalks of the street. They flowed from one of the biggest cruise ships I had ever seen (a large one can carry five thousand people). Apparently, Ålesund is a regular stop on the cruise circuit. The crowd sounded British. Many were elderly. I joined the slow-moving throng, feeling tired and nonsocial. Reaching a small bridge that spanned a narrow lane of water wedged between two rows of attractive multi-story buildings, I waited my turn to take a photo. In 1904, Ålesund burned down in a catastrophic fire. A rebuilding program implemented a decorative style that has become irresistible to cruising travelers, along with the deep water port. The city has another distinction, however. According to legend, Ålesund is the hometown of Rollo/Hrólf the Walker, who was born on a nearby island. I knew there was a statue of the intrepid viking in a park somewhere, but it could wait. After snapping photos from the bridge, I decided to

find my overnight accommodation, located on the lower level of a house not far away. The online ad promised an inspiring view of the harbor and the fjord. Mostly, I wanted a nap.

Later, I walked back to the pretty city. The tourists had departed, leaving me to stare into shop windows and wander the waterfront alone. I noticed a sailing ship docked at a pier. As I approached, I heard rounds of loud cheers. A sign announced the ship to be a floating high school of American origin. Students were arrayed across its deck listening to a teacher or a crew member. They cheered again. While walking earlier, I spied a group of young people chanting and carrying signs as they marched along a street, looking like a protest. It was the students, I realized. Good for them. Raise some hell. And as much as possible! It wasn't idle advice. At the apartment, I had suspended my news embargo in preparation for the trip home only to learn that the previous day, July 3rd, 2023, was the hottest day on Earth in recorded history. If that weren't disturbing enough, scientists predicted the record would be broken today! I reinstated the news embargo.



Selfie with port

Seeking supper, I found a cozy restaurant. A waiter led me to a table, I tried to ignore the empty chair across from me, but when the waiter returned to light a solitary candle, I lost it. Tears came again. I had been doing so well. It wasn't just soloness. I missed *Gen*. There was so much to tell her. It wasn't just words, I missed all the little things that were part of our long relationship. Laughter, for instance, and the comfort we felt in each other's company. I missed sharing memories, too. We collected a huge storehouse of memories together over the years and would often tap it on trips, evoking past journeys and shared adventures. The warehouse was mine now, alone. The tears ebbed. Watching the candle, I thought about rivers, watersheds, boats, and sailing



solo. It wasn't just about writing a family story. In Avaldsnes, I saw a destination: the Sagalands. My family watershed. Getting to them would require a physical as well as a mental journey. It would be hard, but I've never shied from hard things. This was the purpose I needed. Sail to the Sagalands, explore their shores and waterways, tell their stories, have an adventure. I decided to go.

After supper, I headed down to the water again. Tomorrow would bring another long day of driving, this time to a hotel at the Oslo airport.

Before leaving in the morning, I'd pop down the hill briefly for a photograph of Rollo's statue. Walking through the deserted town that evening made Ålesund feel a bit like Disneyland after hours. It was a nice counterpoint to my first morning in Copenhagen, where the streets and stores felt ready for the day. Here, they seemed ready for a night's slumber. I felt the same way. It was great to be in Europe, but I was ready to go home.

I made my way onto a small jetty in the harbor. Did Rollo sail from Ålesund? I'm going to say he did. Why not? He left from someplace, why not this lovely port? Maybe he sailed down to Avaldsnes, quarreled with King Harald Fairhair, and sailed on to Iceland or England to make his fortune before heading to northern France. The viking life was peripatetic. Plunder and move on. Even their settlements could be transitory. Viking attempts at permanent colonies in Germany, Brittany, and North America all failed. Rollo's colony stuck, however. The treaty he negotiated with King Charles the Simple of France held, allowing the colony to stabilize and grow. Rollo's grandson, Richard I, reigned as Duke for fifty-four years, cementing the viking – now Norman – grip on the territory. Why not think it all started here in Ålesund?

It felt like a great place to start a new journey.



Rollo

