

Nordic fishers

The men and the sea

Fishermen relate to the sea in different ways, as this profile of two Nordic fishermen shows

“Que va,” the boy said, “there are many good fishermen and some great ones. But there is only you.”

—Manolin in *The Old Man and the Sea*

August was the month I arrived in the north of Norway in a small village where there were more boats, trees, fish, birds, cows, elks and sheep than people—a village called Leines, surrounded by waters, clear and blue.

The sea in Leinesfjord is beautiful—and with a beauty that lives a life of its own. The ocean spreads itself in a never-ending and undulating blue expanse, and lies in harmonious proximity to the other wonders of nature. Not often can you find such close symmetry of sea, mountains and sky...

Gradually shifting your eyes from the sheer luminous wonder of the blue waters, you see a tapestry of differing shades of brown and green. The mountains in Leines loom high and haughty above you in majestic grandeur, vying with the beauty of the sea for your attention. It is as though they compete with one another to unravel their colours before the human eye. Where the sea excels in differing shades of blue, the mountains challenge in differing shades of browns, dotted with greens.

Amazingly—and comfortingly enough—this huge majestic beauty is accommodating and friendly. Between the waters of the sea and the earth of the mountains lies another blue wide expanse—the sky, with its ever-changing display of pastel shades. The time of the day and the moods of the weather are reflected in its shifting shades. It is almost as though the sea launders its many

sheets and displays them for you, in freshly washed shades of blue.

This panorama keeps appearing before your eyes in a perennial nature-show, and you wonder how one can fish—take life—amidst all this pristine loveliness.

Torfinn Pettersen does precisely that. He fishes. For him, the decision is basically very simple: “It is my bread and butter.” When Torfinn says that, you realize he is being very humble—and that there is more than what meets the eye, that it is more than just “bread and butter” that pulls him towards the sea.

Torfinn is tall and has the detached bodily air of a male model, yet he does not ‘display’ his physique. It was difficult for me to get Torfinn to stand or sit still for a few minutes to talk to. When he does stand still, he exudes an air of confidence and comfortable acceptance of his lean, agile body.

Torfinn is a farmer’s son, for whom the call of the sea was too irresistible—and he responded from a very early age. He went fishing a lot when he was a kid, in the sea and often in the rivers too. He is a fisherman who lives up to his image.

“It is long and big and heavy,” says Torfinn, pointing to his halibut. “I gave it a hug”. Torfinn’s eyes light up whenever he talks about the fish he has caught—especially when he talks about the halibut. A prize catch.

Huge catch

We are at the harbour and the halibut that he hugs is huge—a whopping 175 kg. At night, I hear that Torfinn has surpassed all his previous records, and that he is nearing shore with the catch of his lifetime. At the small harbour, it is pitch



dark and the waters look solemn and subdued and we wonder where Torfinn's boat is...until we see the lights shining and hear his boat *Spant* silently coming in.

It is fitting that on this historic and memorable moment in Torfinn's life, there is a whole jetty silently waiting for him. There are no other boats to steal any of the greatness of the occasion, any of the night, away from him. It is 12 midnight and the rest of the village is sleeping. When Torfinn comes in, he is like a child hugging a secret. There is music playing behind him—from his radio. Torfinn says that music is his only companion out in the silent expanse.

The line rose slowly and steadily and then the surface of the ocean bulged ahead of the boat and the fish came out. He came out unendingly and water poured from his sides.

—from *The Old Man and the Sea*

Torfinn says when he is out in the waters and he is drawing in his catch, he feels excited when he sees the fish rising in the water, big and looming up... Talking to Torfinn, I realize that, for him, the sea is home and house. He talks of going and being out in the sea and returning to the shore, but I feel he prefers a full, total time at sea.

Which makes him a contrast to the other Nordic man of the sea I met—Vegard Rye

Carlsen, the boatbuilder. Vegard is very calm, almost stolid and very unlike the turbulent waters of the Nordic sea he builds his boats for.

It was in the kitchen of his house that I first met Vegard, and he was doing what he seemed at home in: cooking. I watched as he went about his work in a methodical manner. There is nothing of the wildness of the sea or the roughness of the waves in his movements, and his attitude is calm.

"Narayana saved us, she has never let us down". There is pride and quiet satisfaction in Vegard's voice when he talks of the long cruise in his boat *Narayana* over several nautical miles. There is a very no-nonsense and practical air about this man, even when he talks about his long journey; an attitude that almost belies his happiness in having made it. It is this down-to-earth connectivity with the now and the present that makes Vegard Rye Carlsen special. Why and how did he name his boat *Narayana*, I ask. He explains that it was already named *Narayana* when he got it in Trinidad. "I was looking at it and buying it at the same time."

Grand reception

When Vegard was nearing the shore of Leines in *Narayana* for the first time, there were a few anxious moments when the wind did not rise to the occasion, and two other boats had to be called in to help. The reception accorded to Vegard stands



testimony to the fact that this was no ordinary sailing. Vegard had come a long way, and the relief and joy of coming home were as natural as the shining flowers on the hair of the little girls who were all dressed up at night to welcome the crew of *Narayana*.

Iwonder if the contrast the sea offers to these men is a chance to test their maleness, and a means to find their spaces in openness; the second skins they can mould onto themselves. It is almost as if they are going out into another of their selves, giving in to their innate sense of voyeurism, which gets satisfied through the waters that lie in eternity. This difference is what they chase after—the domesticity with which they deal during their shore-lives, and the need to break free. The sea offers the perfect foil to their civilized and controlled selves, and to the civil and metered life on land.

When I look at Torfinn and Vegard, I see two men connected to the sea in different ways: Torfinn needs the sea to live and Vegard, who loves to contain his world in a “rucksack on my back”, enjoys testing the might of the sea with his boats. Yet, there is much that I find common between these two men of the sea. There is solidity, an ease and acceptance of their place, and confidence born of a comfortable connectivity with the sea and nature, and a down-to-earth

practicality—and no attempt to romanticize the sea and bring it inside, within the walls of the home. It is as though they are quite content to have the boundaries well defined, to have two separate worlds—one on earth and the other, on water. And to merge the two would be insensible...

Yet there is adventure, danger and excitement that shake their everyday mundane tasks. I think Torfinn personifies this the most—he quivers in happiness sailing in with the catch. When he is on land, the need is to go out again...the urgency to “sea” again.

Then the fish came alive, with his death in him, and rose high out of the water, showing all his great length and width and all his power and his beauty.

—from *The Old Man and the Sea*



This piece is by Prema Nair (p_n_@rediffmail.com), an independent researcher, based in Trivandrum, India. Illustrations by Gunnar Album (album@online.no)