

Norkapp

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The old lady sat on her stool in the corner beside the big yellow woodbox and the kitchen stove, softly humming a Norwegian tune. Her wrinkled arms and hands cradled Tommy, a sleeping black and white cat, its hind legs spilling over the edge of her aproned lap.

From the hallway behind her a small, pajama-clad boy danced eagerly into the kitchen. His blond hair was damp from his evening bath, and he held a gold-colored, metal airplane in his hands. He stood before the old lady, put the airplane down, picked up the cat and deposited it none-too gently on the floor; picked up the airplane and put it in the old lady's lap, and announced: "Jeg vil ga til Norkapp (I want to go to North Cape)!"

So was the groundwork laid for another adventure of rescue and relief to North Cape (the accepted northernmost point in Norway) during the dark days of the early 1940s and the German army's occupation of that country.

The old lady was "gammergrandma" (more properly pronounced gammcl, or old, grandma) - my great-grandmother, Amalie N. Larsen, who lived with my grandparents in their home in Poulsbo, Washington, where I was born and grew up. She immigrated from northern Norway to the United States, following her daughter and son-in-law along with my own mother, and spoke virtually no English. Fortunately, our town's second language was Norwegian, and there was little lack of social life for her. I was the little boy, growing up bilingual, and Amalie's pride and joy. Indeed, when I was born, the family doctor carried me straight from the bedroom to her arms and said, "Here - this is for you.

My golden airplane was a four-engined, spring-wound, twin-tailed creation by Marx® toys that rolled on the floor, celluloid propellers whirling, with painted people staring out of their painted windows in endless anticipation of their destination. That destination was usually under the wood-burning kitchen stove. Pan American Airways' Trans-Pacific flying boat, popularly called the China Clipper, was the epitome of long-range aviation in those days, and my faithful airplane was named "Shiny Clipper."

Amalie never failed to accompany me to North Cape. I would pull a kitchen chair up so we could sit facing each other, and our trip would begin.

First, though, some background and logistics. Poulsbo - more specifically, our house - was the land of "Sommer og Sol" (summer and sun), with an endless bounty of food, clothing, and the necessities and luxuries no longer available to the people back in Norway. The make-believe adventures had begun as ordinary airplane rides from Amalie's accommodating lap. Little by little, though, nurtured both by my unabashed imagination and Amalie's sympathy for her oppressed people, they grew into the epics they were. The people we visited on our imaginary trips were, not surprisingly, manufactured from the same peasant cloth as Amalie herself: solid, resourceful and long-suffering. Also not surprisingly, they were all old women. (It never occurred to me to wonder what might have happened to their men.) They all lived on top of Norkapp, and each had a name and personality. Their spokeswoman was Kristie, and she was the most resourceful and assertive of all. Karie, who was somewhat timid but a staunch supporter and ally of Kristie. Goldie, who was always late for whatever happened. Dordi, who was extremely shy with a high, squeaky voice. And many others, each with a name and trait added or changed as the occasion demanded.

And so, off to Norkapp. After all the planning was done, Amalie and the boy would load Shiny Clipper with untold quantities of food, clothing, and plenty of coffee and sugar and all the other rationed goodies of the time. Amalie would then "hoppa pa" (Gump on) with index and middle fingers of one hand straddling the fuselage. Shiny Clipper would roll down the aproned runway with a fierce roar of power, and away they would fly through storm, rain and night until, finally, they would dive down toward Amalie's lap and make a perfect landing on Norkapp. And they always avoided the Tysk soldaten (German soldiers) who occupied the place.

It was always snowing, with the wind howling and the North Atlantic crashing angrily at the base of the cliffs far below. Amalie would jump off Shiny Clipper and call out, "Hallo! Hvor er de? Vi komme fra Sommer og Sol med mat, kaffe, kjøtt og alle god!" (Hello! Where are you? We come from Summer and Sun with food, coffee, meat and other good things!) Our actors were Amalie's index and middle fingers walking about on her lap. She would walk to Kristie's little house and pound loudly at the door. Fierce challenges and threats would issue from within. After identity was established, Kristie would open the door and come running out (Amalie's other hand) to meet us, calling to the other ladies to come and get their share.

Of course, the German soldiers would eventually tumble to the fact that something strange was happening. All that new clothing and food could not help but be noticed, and the smell of fresh coffee seemed to make them suspicious. A soldier would come marching up (on very stiff fingers), asking questions and making demands as to where it all came from. And the ladies would always tell them to mind their own business. Kristie and a soldier would argue with each other; Kristie would finally lose all patience and summarily kick the soldier out of her house (with a strong index finger) and over the cliff. Karie would accept her share, but on her way home a soldier would confiscate it and Kristie would have to come running to the rescue. Another soldier over the cliff. Goldie would always be hiding from the soldiers and almost miss getting anything at all. Kristie would have to search all over the Cape until at last she would be found. Sure enough, she too would be waylaid, and yet another soldier would tumble from sight, given impetus by a strong kick from Kristie.

These adventures were undoubtedly Amalie's personal "Resistance" effort for her native land. Shiny Clipper was always well hidden from the soldiers. (After having visited North Cape's treeless and barren surface twice over the years, I now realize that this was no small feat.) And I, too, was invisible to the actors. Like a George Bernard Shaw on high, I choreographed the general direction of the events, and Amalie was my faithful cast that fleshed it out in detail. She threw herself into the roles with gusto, creating each lady's personality and voice, with always a stem, commanding voice for Kristie which, in the heat of battle with the German soldiers, literally growled with anger. The soldiers were always arrogant and officious at first, but quickly became quivering and helpless under the wrath of the emboldened ladies.

At last, after all had shared in eating and drinking and showing off their new clothes, it was time to return to Sommer og Sol. I materialized from above to once again become Shiny Clipper's pilot.

Amalie said goodbye to each lady while I waited to take off. She climbed back aboard and we took off, circling the ladies below and promising to come back soon. The trip back home didn't take long.

After Shiny Clipper finally rolled to a stop in Amalie's lap, the little boy would sit silently for a bit, look up into Amalie's face, and smile. Amalie would tilt her head to one side and smile back. In the silence, Tommy would reclaim Amalie's lap. The evening wounds of the household would slowly return, and the adventure was over until next time.