



# THE PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY

*Elin Hoyland's* new book offers a fascinating glimpse into the anachronistic lifestyle of rural Norway seen through the eyes of one old man dealing with the decline of his farm and the loss of his sister ➤



[Pages 24 and 25] Edvard looking out from his living room window, late in the evening in winter [Above] Scenes from Edvard's kitchen, and Edvard looking out of the living room window again, but from inside [Far right top] Edvard in the loft of his house. "This is where all the children slept when they grew up. Now Edvard sleeps in an alcove downstairs." [Far right bottom] Edvard sitting in his barn, where he washes his clothes

WHEN SHE WAS a young Norwegian student, Elin Høyland left her life in West Berlin in 1989 to volunteer at a solidarity camp in a shipyard in Nicaragua. She took a simple Nikon EM with one lens and twelve slide films, along with a few rolls of East German 'Orwo' black-and-white film, to record the adventure.

"I felt a bit like an anthropologist. I could enter all sorts of environments – observing, taking pictures. There was the election in 1990, in which the Sandinistas lost, and I found myself in the middle of all these things happening. Technically, I had no clue, but I took pictures of everything. It was all so exciting. Photography was a way to approach people. I felt that this was my way to portray what was going on. It became clear to me that I wanted to go out there. I wanted to meet people."

These days, Høyland is firmly established as a staff photographer for *Norwegian Business Daily*, where she's been working since 1999. She shoots anything and everything.

"In the first couple of years it was all new to me. It was different people, different settings – a press conference, a farm, going to a person in an office. Every job was different. I liked it. There were no rules. I had a boss who said to me, 'Don't go for the easy option. See what the possibilities are. Make it as good as you can, every single job.' I think I internalised that. I took every job seriously. Another influential teacher said, 'Remember there are two things: one is your technical skill – how well you know your camera; and the other is what you bring with you – your approach, your personality, how people perceive you.'"

Høyland has an air of attentive inquisitiveness, an openness and absence of ego. It's easy to see how she creates rapport with her subjects. In 2001 she started a new way of shooting, in tandem with the day job, and began a seven-year project photographing two elderly brothers living in rural Norway.

"I could go back again and again, and that's not the case in what I do on an everyday basis. The fact that it was mine made a huge difference. It was me; I was deciding from the start to the end. I felt more relaxed, more free."

*The Brothers* was Høyland's first book, published in 2011. It transformed her career, with awards and worldwide recognition. She laughs with amazement

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[Centre left, above] Edvard holding a photo of Bergit. "I always wanted one image of Bergit to be in the book." [Above and far right] Scenes from Bergit's house

and glee. "It's been incredible. So many things I could never have foreseen!"

Following the success of *The Brothers*, in 2012 Høyland was commissioned by an arts organisation to photograph another elderly man, Edvard – a farmer living in south-western Norway. It was a semi-historical, anthropological project, to create a record of a disappearing lifestyle. It's good farming land where Edvard lives, but the discovery of oil in the early 1970s prompted migration of the young from the country to the city, and provoked a fundamental change in agricultural methods. Now, Edvard's 200-year-old farm, in his family for four generations, is one of the last remaining traditional smallholdings.

The farm consists of a small house, a 'firehouse' where food was cooked and laundry washed, and an enormous hen house that held up to a thousand chickens. Edvard has never lived anywhere else. Høyland's curiosity was piqued by the presence of another house on the land, Edvard's sister Bergit's house, built in the 1970s and preserved in an aspic of bold floral wallpaper, kitsch trinkets and polished neatness. The resulting

collection of images of both houses, and of Edvard himself, has been published as Høyland's second book, *Brother|Sister*.

"I'm interested in the layers of history, the scars and the stains, the changes of time, all these things. I'm deeply fascinated by the ordinary. I'm intrigued by people, their faces, lived life. I want to make the invisible visible, to treasure the underexposed."

Høyland treated Edvard and his life with sensitivity and respect. "I don't have to go into every corner of his life; I don't want to. He should keep something for himself, like I would, like anyone would. There are things I know that I don't show. These are people who haven't asked for any attention. They haven't said, 'Hello, I am here, look at me.' Many people have asked me questions about the brothers, and I don't know the answers because I didn't ask them. There are gaps where something is happening in between, and we don't know what that is. All the answers aren't there, and I don't want them to be there. I feel that it's been a gift, meeting Edvard and the brothers. I'm very thankful to them for sharing their lives, but I'm also very clear that I don't have to, or want to, know everything about them. I'm also grateful to Bergit, whom I never met. I want them to have their dignity, and I want them to be able to say, 'No, I don't want that.' I've asked Edvard if I can make pictures while he's making food, and he's said no. It's a private thing. I asked for a long time if he would show me how he washes his clothes, and one day he said yes."

"I think, for me, that's one of the interesting challenges in being a photographer: how do I find my way to that person, and what can we do together? Because it's very much a cooperation. It's not going to work if I'm there saying, 'Do that,

## I came in at a certain moment. None of this is there any more.

sit there.' Sometimes, Edvard and I just spend time together talking, and then I take pictures of the walls and different things, and he says, 'What are you photographing now?' and I say, 'Something over here,' and then he'll say, 'Do you want some more pictures of me?' So it's a little bit of a game sometimes."

Bergit died in 2011, and her house is no longer as she left it. But she's in the book, in a picture of Edvard's hand, pointing her out in a family photo album. "I came in at a certain moment," muses Høyland. "If I hadn't arrived when I did, I wouldn't have seen the house, I wouldn't have been able to record it. None of this, the interior, is there any more."

Lottie Davies



*Brother|Sister* by Elin Høyland is published by Dewi Lewis Publishing, £30. [www.dewilewis.com](http://www.dewilewis.com)  
For more information on Høyland's other projects, visit her website at [www.elinhoyland.com](http://www.elinhoyland.com)