**Going to Norway.**
(**After Roald Dahl**)

The summer holidays! Those magic words! The very mention of them used to thrill me.
All my summer holidays, from when I was four years old to when I was seventeen, were totally idyllic. This, I am certain, was because we always went to the same idyllic place and that place was Norway. Except for my half-sister and half-brother, the rest of us were all pure Norwegian by blood. We all spoke Norwegian and all our relations lived over there. So in a way, going to Norway every summer was like going home.
We were always an enormous party. There were my three sisters and my half-sister (that’s four)/ and my half-brother (that’s six), and my mother (that’s seven), and Nanny (that’s eight), and in addition to these, there were never less than two of my half-sister’s friends (that’s ten altogether).
Looking back on it now, I don’t know how my mother did it. There were all those train bookings and boat bookings and hotel bookings to be made in advance by letter. She had to make sure that we had enough shorts and shirts and sweaters and gym shoes and bathing costumes (you couldn’t even buy a shoe lace on the island we were going to), and the packed, as well as countless suitcases, and when the great departure day arrived, the ten of us, together with our mountains of luggage, would set out on the first and easiest step of the journey, the train to London.
When we arrived in London, we got into three taxis and went clattering across the great city to King’s cross, where we got on to the train for Newcastle, two hundred miles to the north. The trip to Newcastle took about five hours, and when we arrived there, we needed three more taxis to take us from the station to the docks, where our boat would be waiting. The next stop after that would be Oslo, the capital of Norway.
When I was young, capital of Norway was not called Oslo. It was called Christiania. But somewhere along the line, the Norwegians decided to do away with that pretty name and call it Oslo instead. As children, we always knew it as Christiania, but if I call it that here, we shall only get confused, so I had better call it Oslo all the way through.
The sea journey from Newcastle to Oslo took days and night, and if it was rough, as it often was, all of us got sea sick except our fearless mother. We used to lie in deck-chairs on the promenade deck, within easy reach of the rails, our faces green refusing the hot soup and ship’s biscuits the kindly steward kept offering us. And as for poor Nanny, she began to feel sick the moment she set foot on deck. “I hate these things!” she used to say. “I’m sure we’ll never get there! Which lifeboat do we go to when it starts to sink?” Then she would retire to her cabin, where she stayed groaning and trembling until the ship was firmly tied up at the quayside in Oslo harbor the next day.
We always stopped off for one night in Oslo so that we could have a grand annual reunion with our Grandmother and Grandfather, our mother’s parents.
When we got off the boat, we all went in a cavalcade of taxis straight to the Grand Hotel to drop off our luggage. Then, keeping the same taxis, we drove on to the grandparents’’ house, where an emotional welcome awaited us. All of us were embraced and kissed many times and tears flowed down wrinkled old cheeks and suddenly that quiet gloomy house came alive with many children’s voices.
The next morning, everyone got up early and eager to continue the journey. There was another full day’s travelling to be done before we reached our final destination, most of it by boat. We loved this part of our journey. The nice little vessel with its single tall funnel would move out into the calm waters of the fjord. Unless you have sailed down the Oslo fjord like this yourself on a lovely summer’s day, you cannot imagine what it is like. It is impossible to describe the feeling of absolute peace and beauty that surrounds you. The boat winds its way between countless tiny islands, some with small brightly painted wooden houses on them, but many with not a house or a tree on the bare rocks.
Late in the afternoon, we would come finally to the end of the journey, the island of Fjome. This was where our mother always took us. Heaven knows how she found it, but to us it was the greatest place on earth. About two hundred yards from the coast along a narrow dusty road, stood a simple wooden hotel painted white. It was run by an elderly couple whose faces I still remember clearly and every year they welcomed us like old friends.