

## Harriet's Helsinki Report

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Dear Curious Friends:

Do you even know where Helsinki is? I wouldn't have if I didn't live in Houghton/Hancock. Because of the Finnish American college in Hancock, Suomi, now renamed to Finlandia University, I know people who go to Helsinki. It's in Finland. Finland is next to North Western Russia. Did you know that?

Finland has it's own culture. Apparently it was considered uncivilized and backward, it had it's own language separate from the language groups of Europe, and it frequently was conquered and ruled by other countries. There was a large indigenous people in the far northern snow lands.

I didn't know any of that. I didn't know what to expect, except more Europe. I went to Helsinki for a long weekend just before Thanksgiving, Saturday November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2000 until Tuesday November 21<sup>st</sup>. I went there because Phyllis was there for work. Phyllis works at Finlandia U. in Hancock and sometimes they send her to Finland to their sister college north of Helsinki. Phyllis thought about visiting me in Amsterdam and Delft, but it was cheaper for her if I visited her in Helsinki.

Phyllis had been there a few times and she played host. She planned the hotel, she met me at the airport, she planned what we'd see and where we'd make sure we'd go.

I was just so happy to see someone who loves me just the way I am, someone from my large group of very happily accepting friends in Houghton, that I cried when I saw her. It had been a hard time with Alex, with trying to accept the divorce he wanted, to try to hide the divorce a-coming from the boys and pretend nothing was wrong with mommy and daddy, to deal with Alex's distance and silent treatment, to learn to disassociate from Alex and from my dreams and expectations for the present and future. I hadn't discovered his affair yet, but I was still pretty rung out. And my elderly friend, Shirley Nuranen, hadn't died yet, but she was just lying there in the hospital, basically comatose.

The worst thing on my mind was custody. I had decided to share custody with Alex, which he insisted on. Then I talked to my lawyer only in passing to set up a lengthy phone appointment for after Thanksgiving, and he told me to not agree to joint custody and a few brief reasons. So I was stressing about it, worrying whether I should fight Alex to get full custody or go along and try to be cooperative and how could I be with my own sons only half of their childhood, what a cruel and unfair deal to me, their only mother.

Yeah, yeah. So what about the trip to Helsinki? Well it was a mind trip because I was distracted by my head and my heart. I followed Phyllis around to the sights she chose and they were interesting and all, but I wasn't really there. And I didn't talk to Phyllis too much about it because she isn't that into kids and she has a new boyfriend after her divorce already and I can't relate to that. And she's always had a career and I can't relate to that and I need a career and all I want is to not work at all and I'm sure she wouldn't respect that. Me being a lazy whining layabout doesn't bother me too much, but it wouldn't do to grumble about losing it.

Well, it was the wrong time of year too. It could have been worse, but it wasn't very good. Late November is very dark in Finland. My first afternoon we went for a late lunch at 1 and emerged at 2:30 into complete darkness already. In the morning the sun was barely coming up at 9am. When the sun was up, it wasn't very high in the sky because of the northern-ness of Helsinki. So it was a gray sun, not burning bright.

The city itself didn't feel very old and we found out it isn't very old. It was established as the capitol by some leaders in the last 300 or less years. It had huge wide boulevards and big buildings from the last century that each took up a whole block. There were tons of people on the streets but they weren't handsome like I expected. It rained. I like the neon signs advertising brand names in three story tall letters, but Phyllis didn't. I wanted to go to silly, cheer-me-up movies and Phyllis didn't. I wanted a beer, but that would have been really wrong, Phyllis doesn't drink and doesn't like to be around drinking.

I got a fish bone stuck in my throat and it bothered me mildly the entire time. My shoes were wrong and I had blisters and had to walk really slowly. I didn't want to go naked swimming in the public swimming pool or sauna in the heat either. I was a wet blanket in a cold gray world of wet urban indistinction and darkness. What a drag for poor old Phyllis.

What was good? There's a handsome park running down the middle between two attractive boulevards. The shopping was beautiful there, but not to buy, just to admire. The products were beautifully designed, which was easier to notice because Phyllis studies product design. There were a lot of gorgeous design things, like the woven clothes, the marimekko, the kitchen stuff and dishes, Itala glass. Phyllis took me on the tram to the edge of the city where the forest came in close to a big old ugly factory and there was the outlet for Arabia pottery and Hackman stainless steel and Itala glass and I bought everyone in the family their christmas present right there! It was FUN!

On the tram ride out there, I was sitting glumly looking out the window and trying to imagine living there and looking around inside the tram to see if I could see inside anybody's life, and some old-ish guy winked at me! He was turned around in his seat looking at me. I quickly looked away and didn't look his way again,

but as he walked away after he got off the tram he turned and caught me eye again with a big grin on his face. This was some excitement at least, the way I like it; tame, but bizarre.

One hilarious low point was the ceramics museum that Phyllis had been wanting to take me to ever since her first visit there. Now she finally got to take me there. It was hard because my favorite part about the one room of exhibit was the wonderful windows looking out over the leafless trees to what looked like bog and copious islands in the bay. The ceramic collection was dorky. That's all I'm going to say. But I tried, with "unhuhs" and "that's interesting". Poor Phyllis.

We went to the top of a building in the center of the city, it was a hotel. We went up on an elevator. This was all good. At the top was a view over the whole city, including the bay and islands, islands, islands. It's hard to tell what is land and what is island. I love seeing the water. I loved seeing the rather plain uniformity of the buildings, many built in the same era one must assume. There are some gems, huge, 19<sup>th</sup> century things, but still rather practical instead of inspiring. This view, this elevator ride, this was good.

We went to the swimee meeme (my spelling for Finnish swimming pool). It was women's hour. It was a cool setting with an attractive old pool, almost like a roman bath, with columns around it and an upper deck. There were lockers, they gave us nice towels, and there were two saunas. But it was only naked swimming and everyone was slender. Also, they were "doing laps" with their heads out of the water, hair dry, doing some kind of breast stroke that made no motion in the water. It was like silent swim. No noisy swim suits, no noisy jumping or splashing of arms, no talking, no radio. What a contrast with other swim experiences. It reminded me vaguely of breaking into a neighbor's pool elicily in Greenwich with my cousin to swim at night, forbidden and almost naked. Course we got caught and had to run for it clutching our clothes, through the hedge and gasping out onto the road, laughing and "shhning" each other. This was nothing like that!

Phyllis and I had nice food. We had lots of fish stuff. Finland has a lot of fish, apparently. And potato things. Phyllis led me to eat some pastry things. We had potato pastry things. We had really good torte. We drank tea and enjoyed the hotel's breakfast buffet with salmon salad and vinagrette tomatos, dried fruit (yuck) and muesli, and lots of toast and boiled eggs.

Actually, even the hotel was really cool design. It exemplified the whole impression I got that Finns like it clean and visually tidy and comforting. The room had smooth wood floors, an immaculate bathroom full of ingeneous devices to increase practicality, and generally was space conscious while retaining a sense of homeyness. Great towels and sheets. Very nice.

This, my very distorted view of Helsinki. Thank you.

