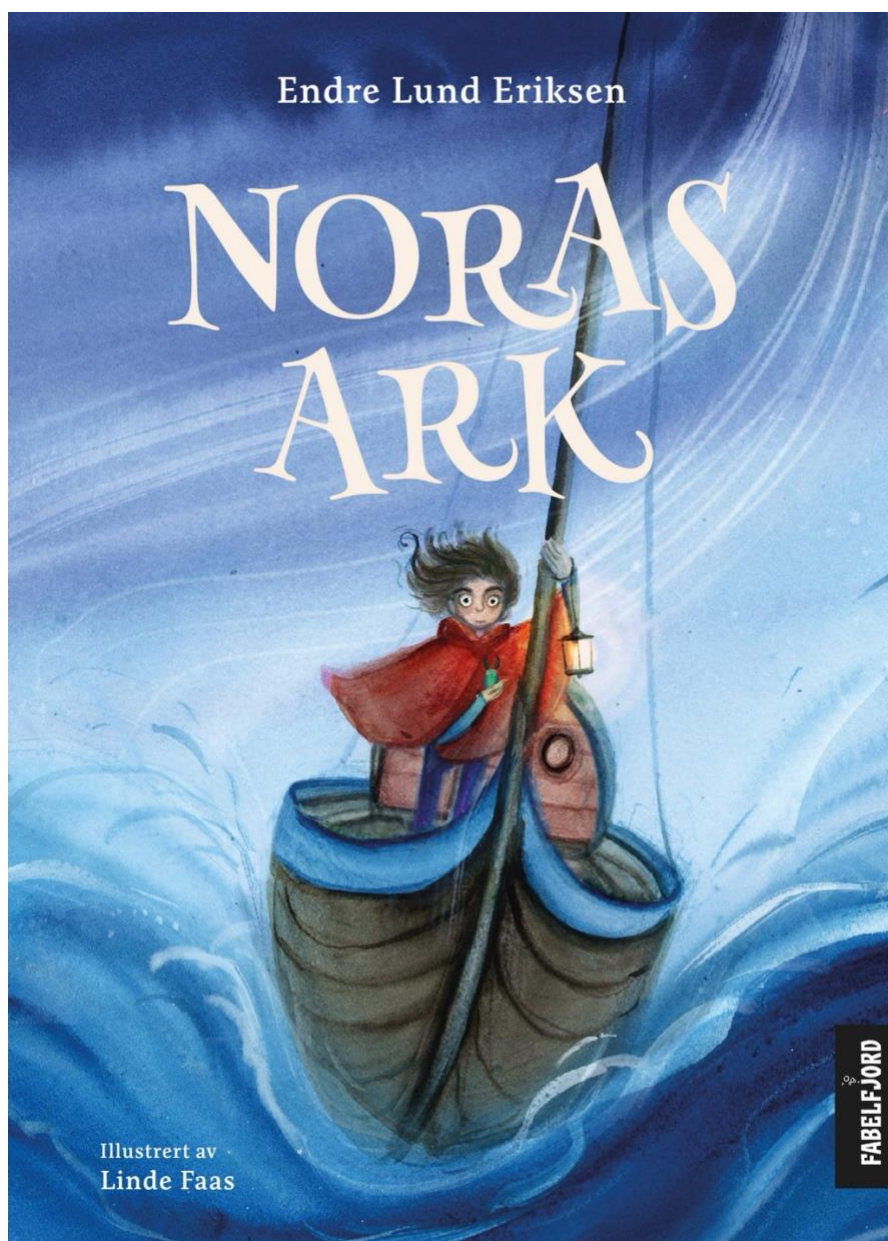




NORA'S ARK

written by **Endre Lund Eriksen**
illustrated by **Linde Faas**

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BILLY THE BEETLE

The fog floats over the water. Dad rows with long strokes and the boat slips forward. I peer at the shore, looking for anything moving, but all I can see is the grey mist.

It's all so still. Raindrops spatter on the water. Dad pulls the oars and the water splashes.

Something has to turn up soon, surely? Some trees. Or the top of a hill. Some steep rock where there's a goat or a reindeer hiding from the water.

Unless the sea's already risen so much that the headland's been swallowed whole.

"See anything?"

Dad tries to whisper, but his voice booms, echoing across the fjord.

I shake my head and squint, looking for animals we can save from the flood. And take with us in the Ark.

The Ark is an old fishing boat that Dad and the grown-ups are loading full of animals and food and everything else. So we're ready when the flood comes, and we must leave in a crazy hurry.

The sea's a little higher every day and every night. The village down here's already drowning, and soon it'll happen up in our tiny village, too. And if the dam at the top of the valley bursts, it could happen fast. Like *that*.

It tightens down my neck, all the way down my back. My breathing starts to run away. Fast and fiery, there's nothing I can do.

"Hey, Nora," says Dad, lifting the oars out of the water, looking at me sideways. "Thinking about the flood again?"

I nod.

"Deep breaths, wee pirate!" says Dad. "We have the Ark. Everything's going to be all right."

"But," I pant between breaths. "What if..."

"None of that now," says Dad. "You think me and your mum would let anything happen to our big strong girl? Hm?"

He looks at me and raises his bushy eyebrows high on his forehead. Inside his messy beard, his mouth bends into a smile.

"If you want, I can always sing for you," he says. "Then you'll *really* have something to worry about..."

I have to laugh. "No, Dad!"

He clears the gravel from his throat and opens his mouth wide.

"No!" I giggle, but Dad lets off a wail:

"Row, row, row your ark, full-speed in the dark..."

Oh, my ears. What a racket.

"Dad! Stop!" I laugh. "You're scaring all the animals away!"

But that just makes him *really* wail.

"Merrily, hairily so nightmarily – watch out, there's a shark!"

Suddenly a white church spire cuts through the fog.

"Look!" I shout, pointing. Dad turns around.

The fjord's dead, dead still. The only sound is the patter of the rain.

The spire glides out of the fog. Like it's the church moving, and not us.

Dad lowers the oars into the water and rows gently. The fog thins as we slip into it. Ahead of us are graves, almost completely drowned. Only the tallest headstones stick up out of the water. The church sits on a little hilltop, and the waves from the boat lap softly against the lowest steps of the stone stairs.

Dad steers the boat in among the gravestones. On some, the tallest ones, you can see names above the surface. But on most, the names are hidden below the water.

He pulls up the oars so we drift, coasting. Then he pulls on a mossy gravestone with a small stone bird on the top.

"Here she is," he says. The name's hidden under the water, and so are the dates of birth and death. But I know just who it is he means.

"Selma Louise," I say. "The lady you were married to before Mum."

Dad nods. "And your brothers' mother."

He holds on to the headstone, looking at it tenderly. And he sits there, thinking. Until he sighs, and he sinks a little bit.

"Malaria's this disease that just didn't exist this far north," he says. "So I had no idea what it was when she got a fever like that. I should have realised. It had got so warm. And all these insects were coming further and further north. Cockroaches, termites, grasshoppers. The malaria mosquito."

Dad snorts, like the word is a bad taste in his mouth.

"Evil little things!" he says. "Tiny little insects, no bigger than a speck of dust. To think that something so small was all it took..."

"You must have been very, very sad."

Dad squeezes a half-smile out through his beard, but his eyes glisten.

"I can't begin to tell you," he sighs. "But luckily, I had Jonah and Pilger. They were only eight and eleven. And then I met your mum. And then you came along, my wee pirate."

I love it when he says that: *my wee pirate*.

"Anyway, you," he says, looking around. "Don't seem to be any animals here. Apart from this little bird."

He strokes the stone creature's head with his middle finger.

"You could take it with you," I suggest. "So you remember Selma Louise?"

Dad smiles. A few fine lines wrinkle around his eyes.

"Selma Louise should keep her flycatcher. It was her favourite bird."

He presses the headstone away, heaving us off.

It's almost out of reach when I spot a small green dot moving on the stone bird's back. I grab the gravestone so the boat stops.

"I see," Dad chuckles. "You want to say hello to Selma Louise's bird too?"

I bend closer.

Two tiny antennae peek out from behind the stone head. Nervously, the little creature stretches its head up and stares at me with its tiny eyes.

Billy.

The name fits a beetle like him perfectly. Billy!

Mouth open, Billy looks up at me.

He's probably never have seen a person before. He must be really trying to work out what I am.

"My name's Nora," I say.

Dad snorts.

"Oof!" he says. "That one definitely came straight from some turd somewhere."

"But Billy's an animal too. We have to take him to the Ark with us."

Dad's bristly eyebrows draw together like steel wool over his eyes.

"Creepy-crawlies and vermin – they can look after themselves."

He pulls hard on the oars and the boat rocks sharply.

The rain begins to patter on my hood, and droplets splash onto the headstone. And now the downpour begins. Billy's surrounded by sea on all sides. The only place he can hide himself is under the little stone bird. But if the sea rises only a tiny bit more, he'll have nowhere to go.

Dad turns to see which way to row, and I hurry. I stick my finger out to Billy.

"Jump!" I whisper.

Billy looks up at me. He tilts his head.

I give him an encouraging nod.

"Come on!"

Then he jumps, his wings flapping. He lands on my finger, and I *just* manage to hide him under my hood, right in my hair, before Dad turns back to me.

"Goodbye, Selma Louise," he says, and he pulls hard on the oars through the water, and away we shoot.

And at that moment the rain really begins to pour.

But Billy is safe.





THE PLAN

The air's wet with seepy rain.

It's evening, and I'm eating freshly baked mum-bread. Billy's hiding under the tangles of my hair, tucked into the hollow of my throat. He's nibbling on a breadcrumb I've given him.

On the table in front of me is *The Great Norwegian Encyclopaedia of Insects*. Mum saved it and hundreds of other books from the public library before the sea flooded the council centre, turning all the books into paper porridge. I've looked through all the beetle species, but haven't found anyone exactly like Billy. The closest is the golden beetle. But Billy's antennae are longer and they have a different shape.

"Maybe you don't actually exist in Norway?" I whisper to Billy.

"Did you say something, pigeon?" murmurs Mum from her desk.

She's sorted the books into big stacks.

At first, Dad said she could take a hundred books, maximum, to the Ark. But that made Mum so angry. She did her sword fighting arms and her thick red hair waved like fire.

“I won’t so much as set my little toe on that tub of yours without five hundred books. At least!” she shouted. “The books have to be saved. As do I. From a thousand days of boredom!”

“So you’re saying your old man’s *boring*?” Dad roared back. “In that case, maybe you should just stay here. Because we’ve got no idea if it’s going to be a thousand days or two thousand days!”

Something softened in Mum’s voice.

“My daft beetlebiscuit,” she soothed, ruffling Dad’s hair. “I made a vow, it’s me and you, for better or for worse.”

Then she pushed him away sharply. “But without my books... the worst days’ll be the worst you ever see.”

So obviously Dad had to give in.

Over the last few days, he’s built bookshelves on all the walls inside the Ark, both in the living room and in the bunk beds.

“What’s got you wondering?” asks Mum from her desk.

I quickly hide Billy behind one of my curls. Fortunately, Mum has her back to me, and all I can see is her mane of red hair.

“Nothing!” I say. But Mum’s read a ton of books. Probably some about insects, too.

“Well, actually,” I say. “There is one thing.”

Mum turns around. “What is it, pidgy-widge?”

“You know when me and Dad were at the churchyard...”

Mum nods. I continue:

“Well, I saw a beetle sitting on Selma Louise. But I can’t find it in the insect book. So could it be one of the species that’s not actually from here, that came up here with the warm weather?”

“Could be,” says Mum. “Can I see what you’ve got?”

She comes over to the table. I point to the picture of the gold beetle, but explain that the antennae were different on the one I saw.

“It’s hard to know when I haven’t seen it myself,” she says, leafing through the book. “You should have brought it with you...”

Billy potters around on my neck. It tickles. I have to press my lips together so I don’t giggle.

“Should I have?” I ask quickly to hide the laugh trying to escape.

Mum smiles her knowing smile. “You did the right thing,” she says.

She hooks my hair aside and bends down toward Billy,
“Hello, you!” she says. “So there you are.”



Startled, Billy flaps his wings and flies up to my shoulder. He looks up at me anxiously. I smile at him so he understands everything’s going to be fine.

“So who are you, then?” asks Mum, wiggling a finger at Billy. He lifts one of front legs and waves back warily.

“That’s Billy,” I say. “Dad didn’t want me to save him.”

Mum snorts. “Enormous dafty. He rescues pigs and poisonous snakes, but little tiny insects – they scare him!”

“Insects’ll die out too, if we don’t save them from the flood,” I say. “Can you tell what species he is?”

Mum leafs through the book, her eyes flicking between Billy and the pictures.

“Maybe he’s the last of his kind,” she says. “So many species have died out since it got so hot.”

Sweet little Billy. He could be the last one in the whole world. Imagine how lonely and left-behind he must feel. No one to play with. No one to share a meal with. No one to curl up with when the night’s cold.

He looks up at me. He’s a little scruffy, maybe, but the green wing covers on his back shine like emeralds and look like a shield. He’s strong – even if he is tiny.

I take him onto my finger and lift him up to my eyes.

“I’ll take care of you,” I say. “And find you a lady-friend. So you don’t have to be so lonely.”

His antennae straighten, his eyes light up. Like he understands what I’m saying.

Dad’s voice booms out in the yard. He’s yelling something to the others, but I can’t hear what.

“You have to hide him from Dad!” says Mum. “That jumbodafy thinks every insect’s a pest.”

Through the window, I see Dad waving to Jonah, Pilger and their wives, Tordis and Fatima. Everyone’s wandering home.

I quickly brush Billy off my hair.

“Hide!” I say. He slips away into my hair secretly. I close the insect book and hurry to my room. Dad’s footsteps stomp on the stairs. But then I have an idea.

“Mum!” I whisper, stopping in the door. “Can’t you talk to Dad? You made him understand that you had to bring your books!”

Mum bites her lip.

“When it comes to insects, your father’s very seriously unglued. He has some kind of phobia. Because of all that with Selma Louise.”

Dad’s boots thump against the wall outside. He always does that to bang the dirt off them.

“But I can hide Billy in my bed!” I say.

Luckily, there’s a curtain in front of my bunk in the Ark, so I can make a little cave for myself.

A little smile lurks on mum’s lips.

“Sometimes it’s better to ask for forgiveness than permission.”

I don’t quite understand what she means, but the door creaks open and a soaking-wet dad clumps in. Every inch of him squelches. I slip into my room and put the insect book on the bedside table.

“Crabknobs,” Dad grumbles from the living room. “Has my wee pirate gone to bed? Before I’ve even told my bedtime story?”

I fish Billy out of my hair and put him on the pillow.

“Stay here!” I whisper. Billy nods and runs under the duvet.

“Nora?!” Dad calls. “You haven’t fallen asleep in there, have you?”

I look down at the insect book. Around the title are lots of little pictures of all kinds of insects. Butterflies and flies. Wasps and bees. Beetles and ants.

And that's when I get it. There are more little creatures than only Billy needing help. No matter what Dad says. I have to save as many as I can. Before the flood comes roaring in.

"Coming!" I shout, and run out to Dad. He may be unglued when it comes to insects. But stories – he knows all about stories.



OUT CATCHING INSECTS

Every morning, I fill my backpack with empty jam jars and hide Billy in my hair under my hood. Then, before Dad wakes up, I slip out the door and run out into the woods.

I lift rocks so the little creatures run in every direction. I knock on rotten tree stumps so beetles and ants come crawling out. I lift branches and find ladybirds and caterpillars hiding from the rain. I catch butterflies and crane flies using an old sieve as a net.

I talk the insects into the jam jars. I've put twigs and leaves inside so they feel at home. The lids are full of breathing holes, which I've poked out with a screwdriver. Because insects have to breathe.

Billy watches from under my hood. I turn over every rock I find, lift branches to check if there are any creatures hiding under the leaves. I inspect bushes and trees and fern thickets. I find beetles of all kinds – but none of them are like Billy.

In the evening, I take out the insect book and compare the insects Billy and I have found with the pictures inside. Billy sits on my shoulder. Then I read aloud to him. About forest beetles and earwigs, cockroaches and pond skaters. Weevils and millipedes. Bumblebees and honeybees.

When Dad comes stomping up the stairs in the evening, I hide the insect book in my room and close the door. He mustn't see the jars full of all kinds of insects, swarming

crawling and flying. Billy runs up my hair and hides in my curls. He likes to come along when Dad tells stories, but he doesn't want Dad to discover him.

One evening, I sit studying a pine weevil. Billy lost interest ages ago, pretty much the second he saw it was a completely different species to himself. He sits there on my shoulder, only half paying attention.

"So, Mum," I say. "Are you totally sure Dad doesn't suspect anything?"

Mum's in the kitchen kneading bread dough. She turns to me and smiles so her cheeks are as round as peaches.

"I think the man's got more than enough to think about, what with everything he has to get on board the Ark before Blankfjord drowns," she says, and she tears off a lump of dough which she begins to roll into a loaf.

At that exact moment, Dad's boots come stomping up the stairs. Billy piles into my hair, and I quickly push the pine weevil into its glass jar. I run into the room with it and then run back to the living room.

The door creaks open. Dad stands there dripping like a drowned submarine captain just washed up. His hair and beard look like a tangle of wet seaweed.

But then his eyes start to shine.

"So my wee pirate's still up?" he smiles. "No rest for this old sack of dead sharks, then."

"You can manage a *little* story, can't you?" I ask, giving him a towel to dry his hair with.

"I *suppose* so," he booms, and smiles from inside his tangly beard.

But then he jolts upright and he stares darkly at my shoulder.

"Hey. You lost your earring," he says.

"But I don't have..."

Pierced ears. Or earrings. I'm about to say. But suddenly I understand what he's seen. Billy's sitting on my shoulder. Shiny green like a really big earring. He must have fallen out of my hair. Now he's making himself as small as he can, as small as a speck. But his emerald green wings gleam in the lamplight.

I twist away from Dad, but it's too late.

"I recognise the turd beetle you found on Selma Louise's grave," he snorts, towelling his hair dry with quick strokes. "I've already seen it hiding in your mop."

"It's *dung* beetle," I say. "And that's not even Billy's species. He may be the only one of his kind."

Dad throws the towel on the chair and gives me a stern look.

"Just like I'm the only child in Blankfjord," I continue.

"In seven months, Fatima'll have her baby, and then you won't be the only one anymore," Dad says.

"I can't be friends with a baby!"

"Oh, but you can be friends with a beetle?"

Billy looks up at me with his tiny eyes.

"Yes!" I say.

Dad tears off his raincoat, spraying water all over the place. He kicks off his boots and stomps over to the kitchen counter. With angry movements, he cuts slices of bread and slaps honey on them. Mum stands there with flour all over her arms. She's about to say something, but Dad growls at her. She shakes her head with a snort.

No story tonight, then.

"Come on, Billy!" I say. "We're going to back to our room."

As I'm about to close the door behind me, Dad roars: *NORA!*

I jump and stop dead.

Dad clears his throat, readies himself to say something.

"I meant 'Nora'," he says, and now his voice is soft as cream. He looks at me regretfully from under his scruffy fringe.

"So," he begins. "Do you want a story?"

"So it *is* all right?" I ask. "With *him*?"

I nod toward Billy.

Dad makes some weird faces. His eyes flick all over the place. He takes a breath like a kind of cough and lets out a pained little sigh.

"Just keep him well away from me!"

And he claps the bread slices together and stomps over to the sofa and puts himself right in the corner.

"Coming, or what?" he asks. "I mean, unless you want me to sing?"

He smiles a lopsided smile.

"I'd rather have a story!" I say quickly.

Billy crawls up my neck and hides in my curls. Then I sit down close to Dad.

And he begins.

CRISIS

Something's not right. I feel it as soon as I wake up.

The rain drums on the roof, a wild and dangerous rhythm. The window's open a crack, I can hear the water trickling. Thick columns of rain run down the window and the sky looks like it's been scrawled with grey crayons. Has it started? Is it the flood?

No, it's something else. Something... wrong.

Billy! He's gone!

He's not in his place on the pillow. And not in his jam jar on the bedside table. I search through my hair and run my fingers down my neck, but he's not there either.

Then I see something. One of the raindrops on the window is going the wrong way, it's sliding *upwards*. And it's not clear and transparent, but green and shiny.

"Billy? Is that you?"

I crawl over to the window.

Now I see, as clear as anything. It *is* Billy, strolling up the glass. He stops and waves his wing at me.

I shove up the window and stick out my hand so Billy can climb onto my finger. "Have you been out all night?" I ask. "Looking for a girlfriend, or..?"

Billy looks up at me and his antennae seem to slump.

"But you know I promised I'd help you find one," I say. "We found someone for all the others!"

I lift Billy up so he can see all the jars and terrariums everywhere around the room. On the shelves, on the desk, on the floor. Each one is swarming inside with insects crawling, creeping and flying, whizzing, whirring and scratching.

Two by two, male and female. None of them are *quite* like Billy. But I haven't turned over every rock in the forest yet.

Billy droops like a wilted flower.

"Don't hang your wings like that. Look!" I say, lifting him up to the window. "There's a whole world out there. We'll definitely find someone like you!"

But looking out the window, I see instantly there's something's really wrong with the Ark down by the jetty. The boat's completely tilted!

The water's as high as the jetty, and the Ark's been lifted up. The moorings are so tight that the whole boat's tipping sideways, straining.

That can only mean one thing: the sea's risen a lot over the night!

Suddenly, my breathing goes so fast. I become completely out of breath, even though I'm just sitting here in bed doing nothing.

If a big wave comes now, the whole Ark'll tip over. And then how will we save ourselves when the flood comes, and Blankfjord sinks under the water?

"Come on, Billy!" I say. "We've got to wake up Dad!"

Mum's already up. Dad's lying on his side in bed, snoring. He makes as much noise as the wheezing old engine on the Ark. His massive belly rises and falls with his moustache and beard flapping, all in time with his breath.

He looks so peaceful lying there. My kind, weird dad!

My breathing slows and my heart comes back to normal. It helps to be here, close to him.

But we're in a hurry. The Ark's about to tip over.

True.

But... that big, crooked nose of his makes my whole body itch. I'm so tempted I've just GOT to.

I lift Billy down toward Dad's face.

"Scratch, scratch," I whisper, and put Billy on his nose.

Billy looks up at me warily.

"Do it!" I whisper, and nod firmly. "He's super ticklish!"



Billy starts rubbing his little back legs against the bridge of Dad's nose.

Dad gives a sudden jerk. With a snort, the snoring stops.

“More!” I whisper.

Billy continues tickling him. A smile slips out of Dad, but he’s still asleep. Billy gets excited and rubs faster. Little giggles pop out of Dad’s nose, and his face twists into wild grimaces. Then laughter bursts out of him, and his whole big body squirms with uncontrollable hoots.

All at once he opens his eyes wide, and suddenly he’s staring straight at Billy. “Nora!” he yells. “Get that shite beetle away from me!”

I can’t hold it in any longer. I pop, laughing.

“I’ve told you before it’s *dung* beetle,” I say, picking Billy off his nose. “And that’s still not even Billy’s species anyway!”

Dad throws off the duvet.

“Just you wait, you weevil,” he laughs.

I brush Billy into my hair and flee. Through the living room, past Mum, who’s lying in a complicated yoga pose. I jump into my boots and run out onto the porch, where the rain’s bucketing down. With a leap, I crash-land on the grass and tear off. The water sucks around my feet.

Dad reels me in. He snatches me up and throws me skywards, giving me a prickling swoop in my stomach. He catches me and puts me over his shoulder.

“Here comes the tarantula!” he grins. He tickles me under the arms with his claws. I try to wriggle myself free, but he’s so strong. It feels wonderful and horrible all at the same time.

But suddenly Mum shouts from the window:

“Noa, look!”

Her voice is sharp. Dad stops at once.

Mum’s pointing at the Ark. The boat’s almost horizontal on moorings stretched so taut they’re shivering.

Oh, no! I should have said something right away, not wasted time on fun and games.

Dad puts me down on the wet grass.

“Sorry, Dad! That’s what I was going to tell you – but suddenly shenanigans seemed really important!”

Dad looks at me.

“Shenanigans are absolutely essential,” he says, and ruffles my hair. “But right now, it’s my job to get your brothers’ arses in gear.”

He runs over to the ship’s bell hanging in the old birch tree and yanks the rope.

“Pilger! Jonah!” he shouts. “Get up and get out here!”

A gust of wild rain blows over us, and the drumming on the roof becomes impatient and intense.

It’s a sign. The flood’ll be here any moment.

It’s all tight down my back and into my stomach. And my heart starts to pound again.

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Agent:
Fabelfjord AS
www.fabelfjord.no
Contact: Endre Lund Eriksen - endrele@fabelfjord.no
Phone: + 47 99 26 56 97