

KNIFE AND FORK

It is early morning. The sun is rising over the waters of the Kattegat strait, somewhere between Denmark and Sweden. The sea is calm, and dawn in this coastal setting brings a deeper meaning to the word 'tranquillity'. My family and I are camping on the island of Læsø with my younger brother, Gunnar, and his family. We do this every summer: leave the peninsula and main islands behind and go camping together on one of Denmark's several hundred smaller islands, exploring the clement shores and blue waters of this ocean-bound kingdom.

Læsø, off the north coast of the Jutland peninsula, is probably our most peaceful destination so far. It epitomises the Danish concept of *hygge*, a convivial way of spending time together on cosy, pleasant activities (often involving food and drink) and celebrating a sense of sameness. Here on the island we don't have to worry about theft, vandalism or similar disagreeable things. Nor do we need to hide our valuables, and we leave our tents and cars unlocked. Our reservation was made over the telephone, without online forms or encrypted credit-card numbers. We will pay for our stay when we leave. Theoretically, we could drive away quietly early in the

morning without paying, but that would never occur to us or to any of the other campers. This is a safe, comfortable, peaceful place. When the children wake up, they run down to the beach to play or roam the campground on their own. When the babies get tired, their parents leave them to nap outside in their baby carriages.

In the words of Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, a former Danish prime minister (and no relation to other recent PMs with the same surname): *You rarely see a Dane with a knife in one hand without a fork in the other.* This certainly rings true on Læsø. Here, anyone can safely turn their back to a stranger holding a knife without fear of being stabbed.

Immediately after this holiday I go to a conference in South Africa, travelling directly from the peaceful island of Læsø to Durban, the second-largest city in South Africa.

As soon as I get off the plane I sense a radical difference. There are armed guards everywhere, and people hold their belongings close. On the very first day I am obliged to adjust my view of other people – to prevent the remainder of my life from becoming very chaotic and very brief. The receptionist instructs me not to open the door to my hotel room: If someone knocks, I must hide all my valuables, ask who's there, then call reception. If they can vouch for the person on the other side of the door, it's OK to open. I find myself wondering whether I will be assaulted next time I pass a stranger in the hallway.

This probably makes sense. I am visiting a society where the police force is corrupt or absent, and where lawlessness is rife in the streets – and maybe in the hotel hallways too.

On the first conference day, panic breaks out after numerous attendees are assaulted. Thugs lurking near the hotel pursue guests who venture outside carrying valuables. One sits on the victim, holding a knife to their throat, while the other searches the victim's pockets. Like a typical food-loving camper on Læsø, the muggers have a knife in one hand, but they certainly don't have a fork in the other. After a stream of complaints and insistent demands from the attendees, the organisers arrange for a bus to pick us up the next morning. We can now dash from the hotel lobby to the bus, avoiding assaults and squeezing into the bus like terrified lemmings.

I haven't done research on South Africa, and I don't know the country beyond these personal experiences, but clearly such obsessive security concerns and constant fear of others has a huge impact. It isn't easy to protect all one's valuables all the time, and such vigilance takes a lot of energy. It would be insane to behave in Durban as one would on Læsø, letting kids rove unsupervised, or strolling along the beach after dark.

Many Danes remember a news story from 1997 about a Danish woman living in New York City who left her 14-month-old daughter asleep in a baby carriage outside a café in New York City. The mother, who was sitting inside, could see her baby through the window, so

in her view all was well. Then a concerned citizen called the police. They soon arrived at the scene, took the child into custody and arrested the mother. Begging to see her daughter, she was taken to the police station, strip-searched, cuffed and detained in a cell while she could hear her baby crying.

The woman was released with a warning, and mother and child were reunited. What she had failed to appreciate was that in the United States, leaving a baby outside in a carriage, unattended, is regarded as deeply irresponsible. In court the woman argued that Danes traditionally, routinely, let babies sleep outside cafés, that we do not fear kidnapping, and so on. Historically, one of just a few known examples in Denmark of someone stealing an occupied baby carriage is from 1978, when a mentally disturbed woman pushed a baby carriage along for a few blocks – and did the baby no harm.

But how should we interpret the difference between leaving a baby carriage outside a café in New York City and in Copenhagen? And what are the societal and civic consequences of similar differences between Durban and Læsø? It would take a trip from my home base in Aarhus to Washington, DC to help me identify this as my field of research.

TOP ECONOMISTS AND THEIR STUPID QUESTIONS

In the mid-1990s, I went to Washington to pursue my studies at Maryland University. My supervisor, Mancur