

I finally understand the Danish way of being genuinely present

FIRST PERSON

On a family trip to visit my in-laws in Denmark, something shifted in me, **Sophie Laframboise** writes

‘We’re always rushing to relax,” my husband said, watching me frantically round up two toddlers, a portable crib, four rackets, two bikes and enough snacks to survive a small apocalypse – for one of our regular weekend Eastern Townships getaways. He’s rarely wrong. It’s one of his most annoying qualities.

I am a Montreal girl married to a Dane, and for 10 years I have been watching my husband move through the world at a pace that baffles and occasionally makes me want to scream into a pillow. He is not always on time, but he is also never frantic. He doesn’t rush breakfast. He doesn’t rush bedtime. He’s genuinely, constitutionally, unbothered by the next “thing” – because he is honestly too busy enjoying the people right in front of him to worry about it.

I, on the other hand, am a planner. A thorough, detail-oriented, what’s-the-backup-plan, planner. We are different people. But opposites attract, don’t they?

Every summer we travel to Denmark – to the north coast to visit my in-laws in the small town of Gilleleje where he spent his childhood weekends with cousins. Now we bring our two toddlers, only 18 months apart, which means we travel with approximately the same amount of luggage as a touring rock band. Every summer, I arrive slightly unhinged from the journey, already mentally planning the week of activities ahead.

Every summer, my husband looks at me with the same patient expression and gives me a big hug without saying anything at all. This summer, something shifted in me.

It happened on a Tuesday – or maybe a Wednesday, I don’t know, which is itself alarming for someone like me – sitting on the terrace of my in-laws’ house watching the sea. Our older son was running between our cabin and the cousins’ house next door, barefoot, filthy, delirious with happiness. Our



ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX SIKLOS

youngest, just 1, was being passed between aunts and grandparents like the world’s most beloved parcel. Someone had appeared with a guitar (usually my father-in-law). Someone else had produced rosé from nowhere (usually my husband), which is my favourite kind of rosé. Nobody had planned any of this.

I caught myself asking my cousin’s wife one afternoon, “What’s the plan?” She smiled, looked around slowly and said nothing. She didn’t need to. Kitesurf boards lay on the beach. Bathing suits hung off the back of chairs. Tennis rackets sat on the breakfast table from a game that had happened, or was about to happen, or maybe both. Naked children ran in one door and out the other, sandy bare bottoms and watermelon in hand. The plan was the scene in front of us. What was not to like?

Children here are not a logistical problem to be managed – they are simply part of the group. They run. Adults watch, loosely, collectively, without keeping score. If you want to slip off for tennis, you go. The kids are fine. Better than fine – feral in the best possible way, doing exactly what children are supposed to do.

For a mother who usually schedules our toddlers’ Saturday with gymnastics,

soccer and then a play date, this is quietly radical.

We are told to believe good parenting is attentive parenting. Present, engaged, stimulating. We sign up for swimming lessons and music classes and worry, constantly, that we are somehow not enough. Here, nobody is trying to be enough. They are just here.

The Danes have a word for it: nærvær. Genuine presence – not mindfulness as a wellness trend, but as a quiet cultural assumption. You are not somewhere else in your head. You are not planning the next thing. You are simply where you are, with who you are with, and that is not just enough – it is everything.

On that Tuesday – or Wednesday – watching our son careen past me chasing a cousin twice his size, I felt it. Not as a concept. As a physical thing, a loosening somewhere in my chest I hadn’t realized was tight. I didn’t plan that moment. I didn’t optimize for it. I just stopped long enough for it to happen.

We stayed two weeks. I swam in the cold sea every morning. I ate fresh fish from the harbour and Danish strawberries from a farm stand and let both children stay up far too late because the sun doesn’t set until nearly 11 and nobody seemed remotely concerned. I lost track of the days entirely.

On our last morning my husband made coffee and we sat on the terrace and watched the kids play and he didn’t say anything, which is very Danish, and I didn’t say anything either. Mentally I was packing the bags.

But just for a moment – one small, genuine, unscheduled moment – I wasn’t rushing.

Nærvær, I thought. So that’s what you meant.

TODAY’S SUDOKU SOLUTION

5	4	8	1	3	9	7	2	6
7	9	2	8	6	5	1	4	3
3	1	6	4	2	7	9	8	5
1	6	7	2	9	4	5	3	8
8	3	4	7	5	6	2	9	1
2	5	9	3	1	8	4	7	6
6	8	5	9	3	1	4	2	7
4	7	3	5	8	2	6	1	9

TODAY’S KENKEN SOLUTION

11+	5	6	4	2	1	15x
6+	3	4	6	1	2	5
2-	1	2	5	3	4	6
10x	4	5	2	6	3	1