

Denmark, 18 years after.

As the title suggest this year's newsletter is mostly about Denmark for a change. Not that I have no more stories to tell about life in Japan, or stories of travels in SE Asia, but a number of people asked: "how was it?" and so I gladly oblige.

As some of you may well know, the Slambrouck family although rooted in 16th century's marshlands of the Flanders; van Slambrouk or from wetland the first record of 1555 states, has globalized a bit over the last century. Starting with a couple of missionaries going as far as India, Dominica in the West Indies, but a Belgian Congo pioneer oddly enough didn't marry my mother. Now more recently the family has branched out on continental Europe mainly. Writing about this privileged pedigree alone would make a cracking long tale, but no; you are not going to be reading revelations about long kept family secrets of sorts, just another digest on my addiction to labeling mental activity as religious entertainment.

That being said, two months had passed since returning from a journey to an 18 year old past, Denmark where courteously accepting the invitation to a wedding in the family there, I woke up from a fairly fancy and colorful dream long before sunrise in the land of the rising sun.... October has always been a time of year when intensity of transition hits me hardest. It's mostly been a modest time for attending funerals and 7 year memorials in Japan, when nature's colors change from abundant green to bright yellow, orange and deep red maroon, to dull ochre and finally pale dead tan; but apart from sharing Anika and Henrik's happiness on their wedding day, my Copenhagen visit and return to Japan were emotionally rather uneventful experiences.

Then why suddenly a thirst for an emotional encore? Had the dark clouds of Nostradamus dreams about DK blown over now that I woke up with a feeling that a heavy weight had been lifted from my shoulders? Ash-grey smoke leaving my imprisoned body while my mind was sleeping with you eternal love, in aurora colored drapes drizzling down to the Tatami straw mats. Is there something like a reverse post traumatic stress syndrome? No, I'm not sending out flares from the lost son passionately playing hide and seek in the Far East, no protuberances from the concrete dessert populated with a zoo of foreign faces speaking foreign Asian tongues, all but a few small humanoid interactions enough to feed my addiction. Is there then no deeper meaning to understand, no insight or conclusions to build the Tower of Babel on? When in the East families dread the dowry and financial undertaking of arranging a wedding that may cost manifold the average monthly if not yearly income, they also anticipate reciprocity, to be taken care of and supported in their old age. Here then in August 2009 West met East; harmoniously balancing the cultural differences.

Attending with me Hedwig, my sister and her son Yves, a good driver from Belgium. How nice of them to drive the 1000 km! Keeping track on gasoline efficiency at 100 km per hour, the car nevertheless blew a tire not far into the Netherlands. Eventful?

I guess it's been in the family since the Brussels' branch included F1 driver Thierry Boutsen in the family tree. As far as his 100 starts including the Japan Grand Prix goes, I've always stood as a bystander off the beaten track.

While setting up the red triangle good 50m away from the car parked at the highway's breakdown lane, I spotted a man at the other side, in a similar orange windbreaker with reflective strips that I had to wear for such situations all in accordance with never heard of new traffic laws. On the opposite lane teeming traffic choked as he watched us from his road assistance car, but I ignored signaling him. Hedwig and Yves were already in full swing cranking up the car, they'd done that before I could see! While I was of little help and watched them changing the right back wheel, the road assistance man showed up. Naturally I asked him how he had managed to cross the trafficked highway, to which he replied: very quickly. Dutch humor? My forehead is always furrowed by a frown, but this one probably deepened it. Whatever, on this highway somewhere on the E30 between Deventer and Hengelo it certainly was a pleasant smoking break for me while the others toiled.

German highways that I used to cruise excitingly weren't quite as interesting as I recall them, not with or without my wife. I guess I missed her by my side; road works for kilometers on end, speed limits never seen or heard of. The better distractions were the smoking breaks at Raststätte. Here at least I could smell European summers, and feel the void of absence from them. The question arose where to fill up, how close to the ferry to Lolland in Denmark the last gasoline station would be, and if gasoline was cheaper here at this side of the border. What shall I say, things have changed over these 17 years, first of all gasoline prices are not even uniform within the same country anymore I am told and all but fluctuate to the free market's whims. All I really remember was the winter of '85-86 when I drove my Morris Minor station wagon, wooden frame '69 model through a snow storm and nearing the border the same question arose as I was running out of gas. The then two lane road was completely covered in snow and tracks of previous cars hardly visible, off the road stranded and abandoned vehicles in white fields without borders. While my fingers and toes were numbing in this inadequately radiator heated old timer, the engine started sputtering and gave up just 50 m from the last petrol station. That my advice was stop at the first station in sight goes without saying.

No sooner than arriving at the ferry we could drive onto the ramp. The electronic sign board with departure times hadn't changed but the frequency of departures had. Whereas previously there was one every hour, now there were three! Much smaller ferries made sense, less time to board, and I quickly understood from the first announcement in Danish less time to cross the Femern Bælt as well, a whole 15 minutes

cut of the 1 hour cruise. Still enough time to have dinner and do some tax free shopping. Fish and chips à la Danoise was at the order of the day. Absolutely rubbish after the fish experience of Japan; Remoulade sauce, a sort of Creole whole-grain yellow mustard and mayonnaise based sauce, horrible, even the Danish Tuborg a disaster, they could have well served piss with 4.5 percent alcohol, and I who thought that the Japanese 30 plus lager beer brands were tasting all the same, beware...

We made it to CPH without much ado. I knew that around the city there were a number of ring roads but that the GPS navigated us through such a maze that was rather Star-trek like.

Gerrit Slembrouck, welcome to Skodsborg Spa Hotel read the text on the TV when I opened the door to my hotel room, while a lady voice in sophisticated Danish said: "the only war that goes on is the one in your head". Needless to say it caught my attention. Tired after a grueling 11 hour car ride -changing the flat tire time included, I sat down and instead of unpacking right away I listened to the lady making her point in a very articulate way of reasoning. Was this discourse a recording pre-set for me to listen too? Were Anika and Henrik who had booked the place pulling my leg?

The man's response in highly educated Danish made it clear that it was not. It was a live discussion about political parties' root philosophy. How civilized a discussion! Each of the speakers took time to listen to the other until the final argument was made before pointing out the differences in approach to tackle the current problems. I'd be damned, for a moment it felt Japanese that also uses a lot of excessive words and complex syntax to come to the point at the end of each statement, in fact a lot of beating around the bush if you ask me.

That this Baltic seaside hotel wouldn't have air conditioners was half anticipated, but no room refrigerator in a four star Hotel? Located in the whiskey belt as the Danes call this part east of the city, where people breathe and breed in penthouses with private beaches and yachts in the harbour next door, perhaps the Spa facilities made the third star, but I wonder where the fourth was awarded. The view of empty Champagne bottles and glasses at some doors in the corridor had puzzled me; weren't there supposed to be shoes? Or did I confuse with Japan again?

The grand view from my room's balcony that also served as smoking area made up for the lack of fridge. Gazing over Öresund towards the Island Ven where once the two mast Schooner sailboat with our crew of 6 docked, Helsingør beyond and imagining Kattegatt and further even Skagerrak up the coast of Norway and then to the opposite to the far right, I spotted the Öresundbroen, the bridge I'd never seen before; connecting Denmark and Sweden. There the atomic plant Barsebäck had been shut down in 2005; had only taken 30 years of protests against having this hazard just

across the strait from Copenhagen. Laid back country one might well observe.

Breakfast on the top floor with view over the Øresund strait the next morning was sober. The serving counter neatly laid out, not comparable with the kind of Bangkok glitter or horn of plenty buffet in Hong Kong, but typical of how much the alternative life style of the 60s had been integrated into mainstream and up-town society. Whole wheat bread that you could cut slices of yourself, Muesli or Granola and besides sausages, ham and the bacon and egg kind of thing, cheese in real time tradition for those accustomed to the cheese wire cutters; prominent cheese and nuts with liqueur flavor that I couldn't resist taking a multiple helping of, and the fresh fruit yoghurt that I am so used to having my wife serve every morning in Japan. Pretty much the same choice every morning, but nothing to complain about, in fact the coffee was excellent, less bitter than the Japanese roast and less clear as well.

On the first ride into town we passed my old neighbourhood. Rubbernecking out of the back seat window, this Østerbro or Eastern Bridge out of Copenhagen -I never figured it out why it actually felt north of the city- hadn't changed a bit, the street view came across all the same. Four storied apartment buildings many of them in red brick some painted over the plastered facades, in dull grey scale or washed off ochre, dormer windows on the roofs and window cleaners going nuts on washing the 15x25 cm sash window panes. No, here no double glazing had replaced the traditional Danish casement window, it all looked so -what shall I say, Danish?

The miserable platan trees lining the four lane wide avenue were quietly looking miserly yet. Hey, the bakery at the corner was still there, and I wondered if people still went there to buy their Sunday morning newspaper Berlingske Tidende along with their special Sunday morning buns; coated with roasted poppy seeds they were the ultimate two times nothing but air bubbles that with butter and a slice of young cheese, preferably without taste, bring forth the ambience of perpetuity and to me a sense of emptiness at that image, as suspended in a vacuum without beginning or end.

We drove by the Chinese restaurant and the photo shop, the pub Rytme-Hans that I used to frequent for one night stands, the small local Irma discount supermarket, the carpet shop to which the Polish partner in my Swallow Maintenance Company changed career, all witnessed a continuity, a stability on the outside, or were the people inside that keen and able to keep things the way they were used to? Slideshow images on a car window; none seemed to have more to it than a frontage, thin as a photo print. Though color films had failed to make a come back in the year's I had gone, at least I got a piece of the digital pie engrained in my brain with Turbo Pascal programming for MS DOS on a computer course in 1984 here.

Hedwig and Yves didn't want to miss Tivoli. We were to meet Stefan there; my cousin

who had flown in from Germany that morning. The two of us would then go around the city center to buy one of the items wished for as wedding present while they could experience the oldest amusement park in the world.

Not that this hadn't changed since its conception, surely many a mechanical motor driven attraction had been replaced by computer controlled devices and there was surely no more position open for an ice block distributor or horse shit collector. Expansion of the Tivoli gardens simply not feasible by the limitations of its square bordered by main avenues, I wondered if innovative developers had contacts with Japanese planners; true masters in organizing any given space under the heavens of entertainment. Stefan and I got going, a couple of hours are not much for sampling and he had a late afternoon business meeting. Onto Strøjet, that's where the walking street starts when you cross the City Hall square, just a stone's throw from Tivoli; all depending on who throws the stone of course. Everything appeared unchanged; Burger King at the corner had apparently staved off the onslaught of McDonald imperialism or were the Danes just so loyalist to their royal burger? Flowing with the pedestrian stream, something felt missing, no it weren't overhead el-power lines of Japan and it weren't the flashy advertisements with Kanji, Chinese characters to decipher. The immigrants! Those that the Danes like to cartoon, where were they all? In Antwerp and perhaps in other European city centers too you have to really look around to spot a native or Caucasian may be politically more correct. Feeling Dane among the Danes we passed my old small tobacco and pipe shop, but didn't stop. Shops with big names as Royal Copenhagen and Illums were further up, passed Nytorv and Amagertorv, where the underground public pissoir was. While Stefan went for a two Danish Krone leak, I observed a troupe of dancers that didn't actually look like folklore street performers. No, they were ragged jeans and brand sneakers protesters! A demo against prohibition of street stalls without license! That was worth a snap shot; living folklore without state sponsorship for once and now it occurred to me that after Japan, Denmark has been the only country in which I experienced local communities creating yearly revues and performing cabarets on makeshift stages with the people and for the people of my then neighbourhood, Bromleby. But even then it felt distant just as it did now, a life worlds apart.

We pushed ahead, moving around department stores, a more familiar experience. Even though the interior design may differ from Seibu Hong Kong to Isetan Bangkok and Illum Tokyo, the seventh heaven of riches readily for sale is after all a dream world to buy if it's only to give away. On the way to work I often go through basement level corridors of Illums Bolighus connecting the street level and the train station but never have time nor interest to explore the 'Danish Design' floors above.

Here however the 125-year-old brand 'Anton Berg' chocolate and pralines corner in rich licorice black and red contrast, designed to draw demanding attention, taking a picture I suppose was not prohibited like in Japan, so I took one covertly; brushing aside the

burning question if there was no protection law in place against spies from the competition.

Stefan answered calls on his iPhone every now and then; it was after all a normal Friday working day for him. I definitely had to find an Internet café later in the afternoon or whenever possible. Georg Jensen and Villeroy & Boch at Royal Copenhagen were a bit out of our league, so better carry on to Magasin, a respectable department store for upper middle class in my time, at the end of the walking street and luckily enough Stefan found exactly what he had been having in mind; a set of 6 crystal glasses. Hey, I still don't know why in Japan we can only buy in sets of either 5 or 10. We said goodbye for the rest of the afternoon at the canal tour stop shortly after greeting Henrik, David and Anika the bride to be.

Meeting my closest DK family for lunch at the Kroghs Fiske Restaurant, this place for entertaining guests in its own right had more eyebrow raising question marks written all over. I didn't read those when I first arrived in Denmark in 1975, still wet behind my ears I guess. Being introduced to the press offices of 'Folketinget' or the Danish Parliament across the canal and the circles of lunch goes at this one star Michelin restaurant it all was dutifully done with a blank mind set. Now this mind also set blank after such a long absence, I made my choice of what was due, less absent minded.

Wasn't this upscale fish restaurant supposed to have a coat rack or at least a hook on the wall to put your coat or hat on? OK, may be hats weren't all that much in vogue these days, but I wore one! Not a white rattan hat with black ribbon but nevertheless no help from the waiter, no sign of embarrassment or apology. Should I upgrade my attitude and have a cane with silver handle to knock the table with, in a manner of expressing that I had reached the age of respectability? As if my long white sideburns weren't outlandish sufficiently? I guess it was the Japan Airlines brand label on my shoulder bag that didn't do the trick of looking nouveau riche.

They didn't have a lunch menu explained the comely oriental waiter with a near to native accent in Danish and that only fish was served here was also acceptable, it was after all called Fiske Restaurant. One could however choose; select one of the 4 main dishes from the full 3 hour €100 course, but it wasn't à la carte. The white wine selected, a 2004 Château Moulin du Bourg, quite robust for a white, with supple tannins, the complex nose is a big scaled wine where the fresh breeze beginning, the middle fleeting satin swinging vines and a bouquet to complete half of the rainbow kiss from the angels above, veiling the black and blood-red hellish modern art paintings on the wall that definitely accuse anyone of being picky -anal retentive even. I felt his wine was great; the name, well, just an honest mistake. The service extremely well timed, we chatted over two hours for less than €100 a head.

With still a couple of hours to kill since Johan the NHK Usen radio journalist based in

Japan but recently stationed back in Sweden wasn't able to make it across that afternoon and Stefan I was only to meet long after office hours, I started walking towards Nørrebro, the northern city area that made recent world news when riots broke out over relocating squatters.

Copenhagen has seen its share of social unrest in recent years maybe not quite as fraternity loving France but undeniably as violent on Nørrebro; following gang killings between Hells Angels and Rockers, the closure of Christiania or notoriously known abroad as the drug dealing hippy paradise; probably all just local blips on the screen of turban sarcasm sending ripples around the world. While pondering around my navel I arrived at Nørrebro station, saw the long Nørrebrogade artery out of the city to the north and suddenly my shoulder bag felt deadweight. Surely there must be a locker here. No sooner had I asked a bearded Dane in denim trousers or I was following him on his heels down the stairs to the sub terrain train. That was a lot of kindness in such a dirty shithole as this station had become. Equally stinking of piss and spilled beer as subways in Paris or London, no need to go to New York to see stern faces, and better watch your step here too, slippery dust from noisy concrete drills on heavy duty, I'd be damned, sensed of the decade after the third world war was lost. The lockers the friendly Dane gestured were behind the construction partition, pulling his shoulders; shigataganai slipped from my mouth, meaning can't be helped. While I was at the station I might as well buy a train pass back to the hotel for later that evening and a sparkling water for the road. At the kiosk on the doomsday looking platform I queued and the illumination had some familiarity with Tokyo's underground at that too. First the Ramlösa bottle, a brand of carbonated mineral water from a source in Helsingborg, Sweden caught my eyesight. Going back in time travel to the year 1707 isn't available in my life time but popularity stretches far beyond the Perrier of Scandinavian countries: I tasted it in New Zealand! Where does the globalization of the wholly-owned subsidiary of the Danish brewery group Carlsberg end?

I was quick to add a 10-clip train pass to my order. 50 Krone if you please! Blood rushed to rescue my calculus battered brains, at this pace my cash wouldn't last long. I'd better get to the Central station and change some more money there, in the tourist area and there might be a locker bonus. I asked the first the best at the holding train: "Hovedbanegård?" and yes, jumped on, right into the bicycle carriage. Having a pull down seat to watch your bicycle across isn't that even better than on the Suisse trains it occurred to me. On second thought however, locking the bike should do, could be the Suisse needn't fear vandalism. Who could tell the real reason for this arrangement? And why were these trains so old and dirty? I guess we are spoiled in Japan, except then for bicycle carriages, but they do have special carriages for women, allowing them to escape from being fondled involuntarily on crowded male compelled to schmoozing commuter trains. Do in Rome as the Romans do?...

Slowly the train pulled in under the central station with few platforms to imposing Japanese standards but with interesting old clumsy looking IC trains to Odense, Århus, Esbjerg and other exotic destination names nation wide. When I reached ground floor, a faint memory of having lost my first PDA there fugitively passed by. Personal Digital Assistant pocket size gadgets, the high tech of the early 80s, were every business men's pride like early Blueberries; now not even high school students in my neck of the woods show off with an iPhone, which is the real McCoy.

Then the unexpected happened, and when you got to go, you got to go; a toilet and at god's speed if you please. Now being in the right place in the right time no problem and before you'd know it I was shitting like there was no tomorrow.

Changing money after 4pm? No bank in the vicinity for sure, but yes inside the match box station, the rate even better than on the ferry. The train back to Nørrebrogade? Not an appealing thought. Coming out of the main exit, hey, the three-star Astoria Hotel was still standing. Amazing that such elite hotel, ugly as it has been since its construction in the 1930's could keep in business. Onto the main street to the left the equally long artery out to the west, Vesterbrogade, that's were Stefan booked recommended accommodation. Having stored my excess baggage in the station locker I set out walking only to discover nothing had changed. The same old movie theatre where I used to see Bruce Lee movies, the big bedding and linen shop and more window cleaning customers. No, I did not go in and say hello to any of them. I did so once on a flash visit back in 1993 which was a rather disheartening experience, nothing you'd want to repeat.

Escape in anonymity, play incognito, identity bubbles that could burst at any time of impact with the reality. No repeats of the coincidence of someone recognizing me after many years, as happened before my departure from Belgium, just a two days ago.

There a sales lady in the shopping mall where I had bought my broken white jacket ensemble for the wedding called: GEERT? Yes, I responded to that name.

"Paula Wiggers, remember? It must have been 45 years since you put that salamander in my underpants by the brook".

"Me?"

"The neighbor bordering the garden to your parents' home?..."

I wasn't sure -pictured her mother, hadn't realized yet it was the daughter in front of me... On the way to a wedding the topic of conversation was the divorce she was in and the death of another neighbor quite a bit younger than our age...

I turned off, crossed Isted gade that used to be a lively locale with hookers and junkies and porn shops. Looking left and right it was as I had read about: purged. Now only tourist hotels with sightseeing busses in front and yes, to keep some of its reputation

in print, a barren porn shop or two. It certainly had lost its luster of the red light area. Still, some local pubs had Inuit, the Eskimos of Greenland gathering. They lived as if they were having winter dark months all year around, sleeping by day and drinking by night. When I searched for my pack of Japanese fags I realized I had left it on the floor of the central station's toilet. Then no choice but to buy a pack of Prince or so. Down the steps of a street corner convenience store in the basement I was met by the Paki store manager and vaguely remembered the riddle Danes used to ask why Pakistanis lost the world championship in soccer. The answer? Whenever they get a corner they open a kiosk or convenience store... I acted as if I wasn't born Danish yesterday but encountered some difficulty counting the change to my 50 Dkr bill. At 30 DK Crowns a packet = approx €4.20 or twice as much as Japan, over and over I tried to figure out, the man lost his sense of Muslim prescribed patience doubting my sincerity, even my excuse of suddenly being a tourist badly in need to learn the denomination for coins to the extend that I felt he was going to get physically convincing me there was no way to play any tricks on him so I settled for accepting the change without making it a tempest in a teapot.

When I lighted up the Danish cigarette it had a rotten taste of old newspaper shredding. Over to Halmtorvet then, there a number of alternative lifestyle people were working hard on setting up the stage for a free rock concert, just in front of Verdens Café Mandela. Summer parasols, well seated tables had replaced the long traffic island parking lot, now that was progress! Business was going well here, why not have an afternoon coffee? I took a seat at the inviting side walk terrace of Restaurant Carltons, waved a waitress and pointed at the glass of coffee on the table next to me saying: "the same for me". The dark haired waitress with thick hairy eyebrows, chest and hips proportionally unlikely Danish, mumbled something that most likely was very Danish but didn't quite get across. "Uhhh, hmm" I affirmatively responded; instinctively that is, as when I don't quite get it in Japanese.

She left and seen from behind yes, Paki or Iranian or so. I lighted a Prince fag, and gazed a 180° neck muscle stretch over the area empty eyed, back and forth, the partly cloudy sky, the passers by, no coffee arrived. A second cancer stick? Not without filling up my dangerously low level of caffeine! I stood up and went inside. Pretty standard rustic wooden counter with no one behind. Much darker here, there the cashier. A sporty waiter, eager to receive payment I suppose did not let me wait.

"I ordered coffee 10 min ago..." we both looked for the culprit, and not seeing her he said: "coming up, take your seat". Well OK, so I did. The waitress showed up with a glass pot of coffee, cup and saucer the whole set. I recognized the cafetière à piston, in the new world better known as a coffee plunger, not without wry smile, but had to remark that I had ordered one glass of coffee like that one on the table next to me. She hesitant and me well, didn't mind an extra cup, so I waived her away SE Asian style while recalling a situation with Robert Lowman ordering chicken and rice in rural

Cambodia without knowing how much it would be. Nothing we can't afford we agreed, why bother haggling a deal.

Sipping my coffee there with nothing to do, nobody to talk to, just gazing around, and to keep myself entertained on this supposed sight seeing trip I observed a couple clearly on the way to get loaded. She, returning to the table talk from either the WC or ordering another round at the counter or both, walked unsteadily but all smiling; he mirrored her alcohol blush likewise. Both in their mid thirties still had quite a bit of feather rattling to do before flapping wings and having confirmed they were meant for each other - for the night at least. Zooming in, zooming out, I looked the other way.

A couple with pram approached. They were a few years down the road of those thirty something's, maturely having taken the pro life choice. He pushing a USV type of buggy, man do they have big wheels and tires! Their little offspring so warmly tucked in, no surprise the toddler looked sleepy. She with a watchful eye escorting them home from weekend shopping stacked in their huge backpacks, a bunch of leaks sticking out. I looked the other way.

The sky unfurled unstable air, a few rain drops on the pavement. The Way of the White Clouds, German romanticism in L. Govinda's perspectives at the one hand; Wish You Were Here to the tunes of Pink Floyd's at the other but both sharing a common denominator, I missed my wife - the eternal sky walker with strings attached to a past without beginning. Send a message in a bottle? I text messaged from my mobile: Dear, I'll be sending some pictures from an Internet café later today. Tardily I drank the half cold coffee, paid the bill, and found my Japanese rhythm: no sooner said than done.

In a twilight zone episode I walked ahead of myself, asked and found the place, a far cry from Veni Vidi Vici but all things considered, yes. Plugging the camera's SD card into the multi card reader, I was ready to transfer my digital harvest of 'News from Nowhere' when my mobile rang. "Stefan?"

The deal of printing poster size promotions for the upcoming Danish elections went awry, I thought for a split second, when I heard Stefan say:

"They poured five pints of Danish strong beer into me at the 'Brew Pub' in less than two hours to close the deal. Are you anywhere near Town Hall?"

"Yes!"

"Meet me at Burger King then."

"I'll be there in 5min."

Gee, the man at the counter accepted my excuse for cutting the hour short by 55min and reimbursed the 5 Krone brushing aside my proposal to issue a voucher that I could use upon return. Denmark at its best, again!

Before he noticed me I spotted Stefan on the outlook, stretching his neck. I apologized

it had taken 8 min laughing at my Japanese manners of punctuality.

"Badly in need of a bite to sober up" Stefan greeted.

"Let's start walking" I suggested, "there's an area in a square behind the walking street that I used to frequent on Friday evenings out" I continued, having Chili con Carne at Dan Turell in mind. Stefan briefed the meeting with the Danish politician who had been in a hurry to get to Odense and had accepted the proof prints while filling up glasses with strong Danish local beer brews. No wonder everybody was optimistic, only pessimists say the bottle is already half empty countering the view of optimists' claiming it's still half full. Reaching the cross roads of two walking streets I got a bit disoriented, but talked my way out of it.

"It used to be this area of alternative lifestyles, you know, vegetarian dishes at Café Sommersko, comparable to the Muse in Antwerp, though Summershoe may not sound that inspiring to non natives. Then when it started to get popular, the squatter locale became fashionable with boutiques and the like, where upscale town's entrepreneurs turned it into a Quartier Latin for office workers liking Jazz and for high heeled single women looking for a Friday night ride out to the swank purlieus of suburbs".

Stefan had taken out his iPhone searching with the GPS app for our location, and disappointingly hissed "don't like this iPhone really".

"It's magic! Here we are, we made it! The central post office, turn right, there is cafe Sommersko". We walked passed though, wasn't particularly keen on finding out whether they still served vegetarian pies for Politiken newspaper readers. But the Chilli Con Carne I used to have for lunch when working the area in my capacity of Svale Rengøring, yes, that was worth a try.

Dan Turell, a sparsely lit establishment of the seventies, had that same still-life style with ochre faded black & white pictures of Copenhagen in the 30s on the wall, vaguely calling pubs in Bucharest to mind. Basically watering holes like these also served a limited number of small dishes and eager to show I knew the lay of the land I ordered Chilli Con Carne at the counter before having been shown our table with menu as would be customary at any such establishment in Japan.

"Undskyld -Sorry but we no longer have that on the menu..." was a simple reply that sounded like nostalgic music to my ears if only for the Undskyld - sorry.

"Understandably things change over the years" I accepted, adding "it's been more than 18 years since I last came here".

Stefan world wiser as a business traveler jovially winked me away from further courting the blond working holiday type of young woman behind the bar and I took heed.

A fashionable faced waiter in his up-beat 30s seated us in the dining section of the cafe at a white linen covered table. Things had changed here! Handing us the menu he said in impeccable Queens English: "Give me a shout when you're ready to order".

Tossing off a Lieutenant Colombo gesture with 'What d'you know' Stefan replied: "Jolly

great!"

"Indeed, for the better I'd say that is what interior concerns".

While I rattled on over old days Stefan studied the menu, not overly complex even for one who does not speak Danish. Still, to make sure he wouldn't get stew instead of roast we went over the details together. Indecisively whether to take Ramlösa, the Swedish sparkling mineral water again or French red wine, we went for simple Carlsbergs to go with the chicken and lamb dish. Before long we were devouring succulent pieces of meat with fries the Belgians could not possibly have any comparison made. Stefan updated me on the Swiss family branch, notably on his father growing lonely with such extended family all living far apart and I wondered if that fate would also be of my own making. Stefan had much more references in Western Philosophy up his sleeve to make a point with shifting paradigms as characteristic for our times than me being caught up in Buddhist philosophy. We hadn't solved the world's problems when the last bite went down but there was plenty to digest. In the astrological years of the Japanese lunar calendar I am born in the year of the cow, can I thus label my cow-like digestion system? Or is it just a Jungian free association? Perhaps the literary style of the free flow of thought might be most widely accepted, whatever; Stefan paid the bill a mere 600 Krone which would be the equivalent of taking my wife out for a similar dinner twice in Japan. Damn, Denmark is so expensive!

"See you tomorrow morning then" followed by "You're gonna pass through the red-light area, careful!" I recall saying at the Central Station, worth a good laugh in response. I headed back to the Internet café and duly sent my wife a couple of Denmark-at-its-best pictures. Keeping in mind that there probably was a last train out of town before midnight proved just right and catching the Helsingør bound train wasn't all that difficult, I even had time on the platform to figure out how many zones had to be used on the 10 clip card. When the train pulled in I was sure that I was on the right track to the hotel in Skodsborg, after all hadn't I asked several of the few people around? Every such a deserted and sparingly lit platform, no colorfully crafted advertisements, no stream of announcements in ear polluting decibels, just one train into the night. The four seat compartment a bit dirty, but at least it didn't smell of a shot bar after closing hours. I paged through a Swedish tabloid left on the window table, reading the headlines that bluntly throws all times gone wrong at you, with exception of glorifying the glamorous tits and for male promiscuity all flesh stripped down to the nitty-gritty just covering the fanny. At Østebro station a tall man, Dane presumably, and a back-packer woman got on, a spitting resemblance of the Spanish wife of Roland an old Belgian friend who got shot and killed in Rio de Janeiro.

After the second stop at Svanemølle where no one got on or off, the dark of the night clearly set in outside the window. With only five people in the carriage there wasn't much to distract except then in drifting off in reflections, a favourite pass time of mine.

In Japan I would at least be able to study Chinese Kanji characters on advertisements that trains are abundantly decorated with. OK, my commute wasn't going to take one and a half hour here, so I'd better not dose off. The door between two carriages opened noisily and turning my head I was pleasantly surprised to see a ticket inspector. I could ask how many more stops to Skodsborg or better even if I had stamped my train card correctly before being fined. When doing so he answered in Swedish I was two zones short. Was it my non-native Danish accent? Confusion must have been written all over my frowning forehead, he repeated it politely in English while handwriting two zones on and tearing the corners off. An instant leap, over an 18 year time zone. "Tak" wouldn't be misplaced I guess, to which he responded four more stops after Hellerup with a pronounced Danish accent in English, friendliness shining from his blue eyes with fair eyelashes. The train speeded rhythmically on through the endless night. He must have seen and understood that the Swedish newspaper wasn't mine, connecting my un-danish look in hat and black business shoes attire -keen inspector he was. Hellerup station was now behind us. Two more stops was it? Had the train passed a station without stopping? I had lost count, gained in doubt, looked around for help, no indication on digital display where we were. Of the two passengers ask the woman, the man? The train seemed to slow down, lights of a station was it? or mere misleading marshland dancing flame tongues? Had this lost soul arrived in the land of Avalon? No, a sign board passing the window confirmed Charlottenlund station, but no indication on what station lay ahead let alone which one we had last stopped. No one on the platform but a couple walking towards the dim lighted shag of a station. Abort rushing off yes, riding on to the next wouldn't be the third one anyway. As the train was picking up pace again, out into the night, the purview of a reclusive expert on psychic phenomena is free-floating paranoia embellished by the suspicion that nothing is what it seems. A few houses with lit interior to the right side, the side of the invisible ocean, my side of suspended time, empty feelings filled the darkness all around. The train cadence the only object at the end of perception lead nowhere to tune in, leaving no trace to track, what's the point in speculating? In a perpetual moment the shift in Creol Kadans alerted dozed senses back to life. Ordrup station, and soon again a Melvillian meditation before the next stop Klampenborg. The light tongues were now dancing over the sea. When at the end of this ride through the night was I gonna arrive at Once upon a Mattress in this H.C. Anderson land?

Brakes feeling solid now and the back-packer woman made obvious preparations of getting off. Skodsborg station, set in supposedly enchanting verdure, scenery of gardens and expansive grounds covered with roses, at this time of the night what a god forgotten place this was! No station master to inspect the tickets, out of the shag named station a dark parking lot without cars. Hurriedly I narrowed the distance between me and the back-packer talking to an elderly couple in the dark. They had also gotten off and I saw him gesturing directions – locals, so she is a stranger - confirming my earlier suspicion that she like me dressed dully unlike colorful Danes,

her black hair and too short for being rooted in Viking times was needing to get to accommodation as much as I was. It came as a surprise to hear she was heading for the same Skodsborg Hotel! "What a coincidence, I checked in there yesterday...I'm Gerrit, by the way."

"Paula." "Hi...-" Not Wiggers shot from my eyes, so we walked the dark road at the back of a 3 storied apartment building together. Did I sense a somewhat reluctant conversation setting out with where she had come from? Or was it disdain that popped up its head in the mirror of reflections again? "Finland" she said, but adding quickly she was Spanish of origin as to dispel any further doubts about her name or looks.

The search of higher truths have inspired generations of middle-class dropouts and stoned self-deluders, what about those expats languishing in exile?

"So what brought you to Finland?"

"Friends..."

Not sure whether to continue this line of smothering small talk -and what do you do or do you speak Finish or so. "Finland hey?" I came up with the story of Yamazumi san who had moved to Finland with a broken heart, and spent the next 7 years there studying Finish architecture of single family houses with saunas, though he was an accomplished Japanese architect. Then joined 'Médecins Sans Frontières' in logistics for Darfur to settle with them in Georgia after they pulled out of the dire straights there... "What d'you know? From Finish cold to Sahara heat?" She said the cold wasn't as bad as people imagine and asked casually; "Where are you from?"

"Originally from Belgium, but I carry a Danish passport and live in Japan"

A variation of a well rehearsed answer, a flash flood to divert from further inquiries and any attempt to box me in, labeled with national identity. If you can't convince them, confuse them. The unusual now was that I sensed a pride sky high behind the dark part of my intonation. And as I later experienced over and over again, the word Japan seemed to stall all conversation. A left turn and the main street shone 50m bright in the dark. Her sneaker shoes pace adjusted well on the left side, though not in step with my stroll. To my right 3 storied apartment buildings stretched long and parallel, some chandeliers alit in wide windows. "To the right there?" I needlessly asked, she completed what was on my mind. "The man said first left, first right and then past the traffic light, on the right". Was praise for a good memory misplaced here echoed half around the teaching languages world as her short bandwidth voice faded.

The T-junction with traffic light red on the empty road lengthened the distance to walk, extended the time to talk. "Staying long?"

"Couple of days..."

"Same here," reservedly I added: "tomorrow attending a wedding, Sunday to the city and Monday back on the way home to Japan". From the corner of my eyes I saw her brighten up at the word wedding but the next moment introverting at the sound of Japan. Are we tight lipped, or what?

"Oh, the bus stop! We're almost there". I recognized the service entrance and the next

thing you see is the lit-up green lawn and neoclassical walkway on pillars flanked by white buildings in a square, grand indeed! Having a royal history going back to Frederik VII in 1852, inexplicable to me was the tiny entry to the lobby. Nothing for bus loads of tourists this bottleneck, but intimate for modest spa lovers with time and tradition for spending a spare dime on luxury. She -what was her name again?- checked in. I went to the bar to buy a big bottle of strong local brew to take up. Påske bryg or Easter brew was still available - in August? On the second floor, in front of 202, fishing for my door card, she came out of the renovated but still noisy elevator. "Hey! and if you feel like sharing a night cap, feel free to drop in!" She passed, saying "sure" but meaning two times nothing. Victoriously I open the door, completing the Melvillian movie scenario knowingly and envisaging a quiet beer while paging through TV channels.

David showed up shortly after late breakfast, 10am, pleasing to profess punctuality in this laid back country. At least we would have enough time to collect Stefan for regrouping family from far and wide. Only Fabienne was unaccounted for and remained out of contact. No one registered in any of her possible preferred surnames at the hotel she was supposed to be lodging at. What had happened? Hedwig cleared further speculations when she calmly read Fabienne's text message on her GMS. I'm on the way to Skodsborg Hotel it said. Relieved we had Club Sandwiches on the terrace. Couldn't be bothered by the pricy lunch for oversized sandwiches, what a beautiful August summer day it was! Packs of cumulus clouds with plenty of blue sky between. Over again I expressed my wonderment, of how much vaster space here seems and if that was not enough: the daylight brighter, sharper, the grass greener... while jokes were cascading, perfect for a late afternoon wedding.

In a caravan of cars we drove through mystical green tunnels in forests with some deer roaming freely, an occasional horseback rider crossing the road where you'd least expect and arrived at the church in the middle of nowhere. A canapé of green branches swaying lightly over the road against the backdrop of the robust roman church and tall graceful coniferous trees in the sun would have made a magnificent Monet impressionist shot, but before I could reach for the camera the first contact in English among a posse of Danish people standing by said: "I am Chang, son of Claus, would you kindly proceed?"

"Yes, I recognize you from facebook" I was pleased to say, wanting to add I was under the impression he had dropped his Chinese sounding name for Christopher. A stern face in response was enough to understand it was not the time to socialize, so we proceeded, sober before the Bacchus, one might well observe.

Vædbæk Kirke, the Lutheran church in which the wedding ceremony took place was

small, stripped of grotesque biblical paintings, without saints adorning the heavens, the bare white chalked walls felt chilly on this beautifully warm and sunny day.

The service began at 1600 hours. A sermon quoting the grand Danish philosopher Grundvig confirmed just how Danish the Bible was or was it the other way around how biblical Grundvig his expressions? Good I was not in the position of walking the bride to the altar. David made the perfect Goodman for Anika and Henrik's brother from Sweden taking the place of his mother equally lived up to his rôle. Fabienne who sat to my left crossed eyes with me and I nodded, conformingly adding yes, Anika looks just like you on your wedding day. Her face profile, her posture, perhaps the way her hair was tied up and the lace veil covering it made her look like a Flamenco Madonna.

No pompous American style solemn exchange of vows, the wedding rings yes, Henrik couldn't wait till the priest in full protestant attire formally declared them husband and wife; and now you may kiss the bride... he did so right after Anika replied: "I do". Trying in vain to compete with the professional photographer better placed, I zoomed and pressed the shutter in what should have been perfect timing, overheating the Cannon IXY and finding out later many of them were blurred. The rest of the protocol went without hiccups and I was glad to be out in a warmer environment.

Claus approached me while I was observantly waiting for my turn to kiss the bride congratulations, I was glad in fact. Had I not sent a CD with website picture story of the early days in Japan without ever getting any response?

"Have you met anyone of the friends of old" was his opening. "Sorry to say, no" but I quickly reversed the course of living in denial, summed up some names of people on Facebook that I had been in touch with recently. Bernd Pawlik whom I had googled and found on a Windows Live blog reporting on life in Nepal a couple of years ago, and then there was Susanne of the CPH University time with Tarab Tulku, but most notably Robert Lowman whom I had met several times in London in the early 90s, traveled with in HK, SE Asia and lived 4 years in the perimeter of my neck of the woods in Japan. Conversation stalled "Japanese cigarette?" I casually offered, "Oh, yes!" he gladly accepted, but then somehow after it getting it lit turned to a group of people unknown to me.

We faced each other now at a distance, the very instance transformed the very sight, there he was among the Danes, here I was among... distracted I also turned my face away... among... where do I belong? There my sis, my cousin, among my other kin.

In line with Fabienne's exemplary wedding Anika and Henrik chose to be driven away in a vis-à-vis horse-drawn carriage. Off they went, strewn over with rice, popped bottle of champagne, off to the wedding reception. We all just had to follow suit, albeit in a pair of engine driven wheels. Some attending Asian looking young women had been in my eyeshot before and now also, on the parking lot. Ignoring my inquisitive impulse I asked David if the elderly couple with whom one of them was were not Henrik's parents.

"Yeah, they are" he said. "Well, we haven't been introduced yet, so I'd better say hello" I was on my way to the other side.

"Goddag, I'm Gert" I greeted, using my Danish first name and with hand held out to the lady, I was badly upholding Western standards of manners. Her response was music to my ears: "Vilkommen til" sounded so genuine, so sincere, it must have widened my smile, extending it to my ears. "My husband" was a natural follow up. "Sir, glad to make your acquaintance" I greeted in a Danish that may have sounded archaic. Not sure if the response was likewise, but the handshake felt firm and affirmative.

I returned on my paces with the echo of 'see you at Raadvad Kro'.

David was so kind enough to drive us through the green fairy tale again. This scenic road could be many places on earth but Denmark? This country I'd never really known, how nice it must be for the newly weds to go on a honey moon around the country.

There at the Raadvad country inn, an idyllic spot at a small lake surrounded by forest, those who hadn't broken the ice at the church doors, got a second chance to cavort with one another here on the patio overlooking the lake. With plenty of glasses of champagne at hand, skål and cheers, small talk followed the flow naturally. A group picture of attending family was taken from the balcony above, I liked the idea. A chat here and there, with free lance journalist Carl-Johan, unpretentious with finely honed musings, no sh\*\*, for a minute I believed it had substance.

It must have been well past 6, but still bright daylight when the toast master invited everyone in, onto the banquet it was.

A banquet with toast after toast, speech after speech, all well prepared and rehearsed. Funny ones, emotional ones, parental ones... The banquet was neither Japanese lavish, nor Danish modest, but appropriate to the occasion and number of carefully turned out guests. I felt in my skin with well organized timely smoking breaks for those surviving nicotine addicts. Tabletalk with Mrs. Hybolt, the warmhearted lady in her element, with grown up children and a husband young enough to go with the time of changes in society. Conversation stalled at first when the word Japan slipped out of my mouth and Anika cast a sideways look at me twice. I had no intention to elaborate on that topic at all, and Mrs. Hybolt satisfied with my reduced Danish: self-employed, a variety of different work, teaching, general affairs at an agency for studies overseas, website designer in reply to her question about my employment. Talkative in a pleasant way, I learned about her husbands tackling big company competitors, of his first encounters with foreigners in a Danish workplace. Dish after dish was served and I enjoyed each and every one of them, not to forget the exquisite wine.

The Newly Weds were coerced in numerous skåls and passionate French kissing in all positions, standing on a chair, on the table and under the table like eloping lovers which I believe is not included in the Kamasutra ones.

When finally after desert -Coffee and Cognac for me please- had come, coffee became less and cognac more, it had been ages I became so intoxicated. And when I start wondering whether I have too little blood in my alcohol circulation I retreat to my corner, close off, cave in. People moved to the dance floor in another room waving Danish flags signing the national anthem with adapted lyrics to the occasion.

Leery of luster lummoX, I made myself scarce without goodbye. Lasting impressions of fleeting moments in the early morning hours I do recall to this day.

Well behaved, tourists befitting, our small family party of 4, -where was Fabienne who had come all the way from the Netherlands? - made it with our teetotaler driver Yves to a parking lot on Langelinie the next day.

To reconnoiter old territory, walking along the roads of old around the Kastellet Fort with five star shaped moat, new discoveries followed. The insignificant Little Mermaid had been bestowed a real seaside promenade with a Shakespearian company performing to the best of what Danish grass roots could produce. Baltic Sea ferries to Sweden and Finland, and the cruise ship to the Norwegian fjords had moved to more spacious docks. One in particular caught in the vizier of many a camera toting tourist impressed, it topped the apartment building on the quay next to it in height and contained it manifold in length; a floating small city in other words. At one point Stefan showed the pics he had taken on his 15 km morning jog following our boozing evening out, can't recall how many years it has been exactly, cycling through a hangover, but it must be more than 5.

Onto the next landmark: Amalienborg Palace. Where in the world, which country's capital provides a parking space free of charge at weekends as close as 50 meters to the Royal Palace? Think CPH, Amaliengade! Actually the royal palace is not one, but four different palaces flanking a square. You wouldn't give Copenhagen as the capital of the oldest kingdom in the world anything less than thumbs up for its social welfare infrastructure. I recognized some street names and realized for the first time that Fredericia Gade where I was accommodated arriving in 1976 CPH actually started right there at the greater Royal Palace quarter. On we strolled to Nyhavn, the old harbour; that is literally the new harbour if you don't wish to get lost in translation.

Time for lunch, plenty of establishments for holiday makers to chose from, terraces with parasols lined up along the quay, 30 a rough guess wouldn't be far off the mark. Not choosy we ducked under a parasol where a table had just been vacated, took seats in a manner of first come first served. This was CPH after all and my Japanese ingrained habits absent; absolve me! A young waitress, working during the school summer vacation I assumed came to clear the table. Unfortunately she dropped a knife with butter onto my light beige pants leaving a greasy stain that no prompt use of Japanese tissue paper could undo. Sorry she simply said and carried on as if saying sorry was the common currency for all matters of clearing tables, while I was trying to salvage my appearance for the rest of the day. She returned to take our order,

inputting the simple two times A lunch and two times a B dish on the handy terminal. Stefan raised in Switzerland with tight table manners and professed professionalism when it comes to serving food, dished up some stories about bad service at prominent restaurants in Brussels, otherwise among the highest ranking world wide.

I recollected one we had shared in Cologne. At that time too we both became aware of the unacceptable long time that had gone since our order was taken.

Yves was cascading jokes again and the others joined in, I retained none, but cast some looks around signaling question marks, saw that people who had come after us were served first, to which Stefan, by lack of a glass to knock with a knife as an educated signal demanding attention, raised his hand and vocally called the waitress at the cashier nearby. I had heard questionable excuses of 'not my fault it's the chef's or kitchen's, in Quebec, but this time it was simply: the handy terminal device had not registered our order. Whereas I would have argued: why did the waitress not come back and ask again or so; Stefan was quicker to cut the Gordian knot and reiterated the simple order with free coffee to make up for the butter stain and the emotional distress of our stomachs. I was quick enough to add a recharge of my camera battery, all to which was agreed on. When finally lunch was served Stefan was also the first one to draw attention to the need of forks and knives to eat with. While the food was getting cold, in my poor philosophical reflections I conceived of the devil eating flies when in dire need, but lunch was all right. The coffee came and it was just a repeat exercise to remind them we needed teaspoons to stir the milk with.

Whose credit card it was that paid for it I don't remember. Things blur out in the course of time, except then when my sister's wasn't accepted at an Italian pasta restaurant across our beach side spa hotel, but mine was.

To saunter along Nyhavn is a must for every CPH visitor. Sporadically I heard some Italian and German, even Flemish but all the more Scandinavian faces passed by, men in stubble beards and sloppy worn summer fashion to go with it. Pretty Danish women here too, why do we always see the ugly western women in Japan? I guess for Europeans that must somewhat be the same with Japanese tourists.

We made a round around Kongens Nytorv round about. Having little interest in the modern art sculptures set up on the central island, I walked ahead on my own looking out for familiar places of the past still present. Had Bronnum changed to a ticket sales office next to the Opera house? That would be the crown of change. The place must have been build at the same time as the theatre itself, it had that rustic interior that one immediately associates with blue blood of previous centuries. I recalled the owner's office and how impressed I'd been with his style of dealing with me as the cleaning company of his chain of restaurants, bars and night clubs.

Reaching good 180 of the 360° view, the department store Magasin looked as did the prestigious Hotel d'Angleterre, empty behind the façades of 1868 and 1849 respectively, I do not have any memories to cherish; it was after all before I was born.

The others were catching up on me and time to return to the car. Along the other quay I recognized classical postcard views of Nyhavn. The light ship, old small fishing boats and showcase turned sailboats. And why not also take a 'I was here' photo? For the real house boats in Amsterdam like canals we would have to go further and then, who was interested any longer in 60s pot smoking lifestyle? In the courtyard of the Royal Academy of Art there was an untouched marijuana plant growing; too early to harvest the cannabis holding flowers. Even the scent of a crushed a leaf between my fingers did not mushroom up mirages of middle aged earth on an Indian summer.

We rode back to the hotel under white clouds, elevation higher up from the nimbus of dense cirrus clouds, adorning the vast space of blue sky around and above. Along the winding coastal road I kept watching the many white sails dotting the dark cobalt blue waters. I bet it was going to be cold if not icy cold swimming for me being acclimatized to sizzling hot summers, but joining Stefan in his resolution of not leaving DK without a dip and I had half hearted whispered I'd go in with him while silently thinking at least with my big toe. He had checked out before noon but keeping his bathing suit, towel and baggage in my room at hand, picking it up was just a matter of convenience. Across the road, a path through thorny bushes led us to a patch of not privatized beach with a small breakwater. The sun shining but with daytime temperatures just hovering around 20, and considering I start wearing long underwear in Japan when temperatures drop below 20 that would be a challenge! Stefan apparently had not so much thought to discard, he was already well into waist deep water, splashed some over his shoulders and warped head under. Better follow suit, albeit in turtle pace and dipping my big toe first, yes painfully cold. But that would change of course the deeper you step in and the further you proceed, then limbs would be numbing and the only way forward is then to swim. No swell or rollers to jump against or dive under, I was now almost breast deep and had yet to find the courage to splash water into my face and over my back. What made me remember I forgot my goggles on the beach, a hint for abandoning the plunge? Back then, after all the infection on my right eye hadn't gone despite the 3 days of medication the eye doctor had comforted me with. Salt sea water is supposedly good and healing ailments but who's opposing the common knowledge that the Baltic Sea is among the worst polluted? Out of the water as the experienced know can feel even colder, so grabbing the goggles and back in again was the better solution. How the Baltic Sea looked forbiddingly dark! I made pleasing quick progress this time though, splashing water around, a breast stroke or two before the crawl. Where were all the needles that are supposed to stitch you up in torturous icy feelings? Short of breach, yes, but sure to make it to the sandbank where I could stand again, I splashed on. Stefan was already past that stage and swam further out parallel to the beach. Tip toeing on solid sand under my feet helped but I wondered what that shortness of breath was all about, smoking's bad for your health no doubt.

I signaled Stefan I was heading back for the beach. Just 25m into the 50 to shallow

waters breathing became a real threat, I couldn't inhale; feeling a paralyzing pressure on my chest. Changing to breast stroke helped take in a single breath of precious air that I kept until my heart signaled pain to release. Beyond control, half a breath in, just enough to encourage two more strokes and gasping for more air two more.

No question here about keeping your head cool, above water, yes, and no panic, definitely yes.

No tide to speak of, the sea wasn't going to suck me off shore. My wife Nongkie flashed through my mind; she survived near drowning off the coast in Bali. As breathing difficulties didn't worsen, confidence grew. Short quick half length strokes, I was going to make it to where I could stand again. A first feel for solid ground and yes, I stood. Shoulders well in the air, breathing less claustrophobic. Taking off the dark goggles the sun shone brighter pale spots on the beach. Steps unsteady but moving ahead, careful, there were treacherous rocks and sharp edged stones to avoid. I distinguished colours, algae from sand now and waded as a drunk towards the family on the beach. No V-sign for the camera, just wet like a half drowned back-alley cat.

The towel felt like sandpaper but served its purpose of drying. Stefan was now also on the way out, behind him some rowboats, the sportsmen warmly packet in life vests and the Danebro flag at the bow, worthy of a postcard picture snapshot and a well deserved fag after that. Then the shivering set in, man, shivering, shivering in short shock waves, tightening jaws as not to clatter teeth but loosing the grip on the fag between my fingers, I shivered my clothes on hardly feeling the warmth of the afternoon sun braking through the white clouds. "Never experienced such shortness of breath" I said apologetically. "That's the laming effect of cooling off too much" Stefan explained. "oh, really? So I can light up another one?" No one replied. Everyone had their own thoughts on the matter, me included and fired up. Crossing the road on the way to the hotel a group of cyclists drove by, oh my, quietly I saw myself among them and instinctively blew the snot out of each nostril at turns.

Time to say goodbye to Stefan. He was in good time for a direct train to Kastrup Airport to catch an early evening flight back home in Balve, Sauerland.

For the three of us left, there was one more evening meal to hunt before the long journey next day. Not much night life around this spa, and no locals around to ask, what to do? Rely on my sis of course, woman of keen observations, she had noticed an Italian on the way to the beach. Yes, why not?

I went for a change of clothes, not that I expected the place in this upscale neighborhood had a dressing code or Nike vs LaCoste evaluating looks, but well, it's nice to fall in with the environment and hacking a piece of heaven down into a hive of hidden honey. Without the dark sunglasses but with a sweater Alain Delon style over my shoulders I met up in united brand-less summer colors at the door of 304. My nephew answered and my sis behind him, her fair hair put up and in all splendors for an evening out. An appropriate compliment for her dress stuck in my throat and sunk

my eyelids, lightning struck a vision too bright to bathe in. What the heck, let's get on with it. Outside, freshness engulfed everything but my nicotine coated nostrils and I was glad to get into the Italian. Now that was something new for a change, what must have been the drawing room of this aristocratic maison had been refurbished into a wine cellar looking entree where you could select your wine before ordering a meal I suppose, but no one was there to greet us or to suggest that. For a moment I believed we had to take the stairs up, but apparently the dining room was ahead. A build-out verandah with sea view; closed with make-shift windows and a wooden floor, left me with a feeling some sort of dim lit night life at least. The sparsely distributed plants made my heart long for lush tropical green, never mind the cheap neon lights in those developing regions, you could see the stars. Danes must love this style with candles on every table, the atmosphere of privacy around the glow, under dark cover. We were seated on the second row from the window tables, which was central and quite all right for absorbing the mystique and leaving the twinkling lights over the cobalt sea undisturbed. "The four course menu?" the non-descript waiters asked. Hesitation, "We haven't decided yet". Must have sounded like a machine translation to Danish since she added in English "Wine?" How embarrassing! Just let me know when you're ready to order".

To Hedwig I said in my outdated quaint Flemish "Hedde di praize gezing?" and to the waitress in English: "We'd like some mineral water, sparkling if you please", and looking at Hedwig, she conformed but Yves wanted soda pop. When the waitress had gone Hedwig joked "The waitress must have believed you're the stereotypical family father, deciding for all of us". "We may look alike, many a married couple starts taking after each other 20 years into their marriage" I reasoned. But Yves..., looking him into the eye "he may well be a bastard born out of wedlock..."

Now to the serious part, dinner. Single dishes of spaghetti and pasta were available, no need to break our brains over converting currencies and coming to the same conclusion we'd be paying the white of our eyes. We had more or less settled on spaghetti dishes when the mineral water arrived spurring us ready to order. Spaghetti with lamb, Spaghetti with champignons and cream sauce and Spaghetti with whatever... this one.

Now that was something new, sparkling water served in carafes, wide necked, with a prop to keep the spark and it was tasty. Would they really pour two small 33 ml or have the liter bottle one ready in the fridge, home made perhaps, couldn't tell whether it was the water or the gaz that made the difference with the one I make at home, only this one was better. Looking around, no one was smoking, no women with pipe or cigarillos, no common sight of smoke whirling through faint beams of light. Only one way to go, outside on the pier. Unnoticed I passed by a family of five near the door to the pier. Grandfather with ascot tie knotted in his open collar and grandmother too showed all signs of having reached the age of respectability, two adolescent grandsons

and their mother in gold garlands that shone too old for her age. If the husband wasn't out sailing his 80 ft yacht with the boys club then he was surely on a business trip to a Caymans tax-free haven for offshore bank accounts with accompanying secretary, the thought lingered on while I lit up. I skimmed the horizon for distraction but emptiness prevailed. The coast line to the left and right of the restaurant too had little to offer but rocks placed as breakwater for waves that never came. The seawater below the pier on stilts, clear enough to see the bottom, left me with no scent or odour wished for to take home. Further scouting was probably futile and peeking in through the restaurant's windows for entertainment I saw not all that many people. At the next window table to the family of five two grey women were having the four course dinner, half way through their second bottle of wine I wondered whether they were lesbians the way they eyed each other. To hell or heaven with people's sexual orientation why even question it. A couple sitting further away in the corner with a hedge of ivies growing the heck tall; who am I to assume they were a couple? What to do with the cigarette butt? How the Danes do as the Romans do in Rome, flip it away? I just pocketed it the Japanese way and went in. Not bad timing, the food was served no sooner than I sat, boasting of how nice it was to get some fresh nicotine air. Neither my sis nor my ever joking nephew Yves commented, probably as dumbfolded as I seeing the giant plates with a Lilliput portion of spaghetti. Proportionally speaking eyes filled the stomach quite satisfactory. The champion cream sauce on my plate tasted subtle compared to the one I am accustomed making; too buttery round, no palate peak or after sharpness just flat without beginning or end. Not being well versed in gourmet lingo the table talk was nevertheless approving of the cuisine.

Yves' gigs could fill book volumes, and as so often I drifted off in absent mindedness, seeking a contact point that would allow for launching a slideshow of inner reflections. The waitress passed by, an obvious opportunity for distraction. Something was wrong at the table where the two lady tourists had dined luxuriously with wine and everything. The German credit card had not passed. Couldn't be the result of another protectionist law in addition to the one prohibiting Germans to buy land; they'd buy up the whole of Denmark. Americans had tried similar, buying and running EU highways so they could levy tolls. That didn't succeed but they managed to wreck Opel, Saab and who else knows what Pax-Americana will bring in the future.

We watched them as neither had sufficient cash. The advice? One of them stays while the other one goes by taxi to the nearest town's ATM with currency exchange capabilities 24 hours around the clock no problem. That ATM some 10 km round trip was easy enough to locate on the Internet; what a customer service!

I wonder if the photograph of visiting John Denver, US country singer and star of the early seventies when I lived in Japan could tell more than a thousand words...

Denmark, 17 years on and off, 18 straight years of life in Japan, summing it all up; what's the breakdown? Visions of the past, visions of the predictable future -old age and death, how many times do we repeat the fatal attraction of looking into how things appear, how they were, how they could have been harmonious with the vision of the projected time line, but are not. How they should have been in accordance with efforts made to gain and attain the promised land of peace and prosperity, and how things are today in fact resulting from how they were beyond control yesteryear and the year before that. And when the vision of moving around in a world spontaneously does arrange itself like a kaleidoscope mandala manifesting fractals, then all seems normal without norms. And when dual core energies on a collider accelerated course bang, nothing more harmonious -from west to east and vice versa, is resulting than a marvelous wedding day. Marriage between two people though not constitutionalized in Buddhism, does appear harmonious to me when making Kindness to religion. Etymologically speaking in Middle English kyndenesse, of the same kin, essence, nature, and we're back to square one then.

When I'm so desperately separated, like a motherless child, you arise without me calling your name. Physically I sense your loving kindness, though you're not by my side. It touches every hair of my being when the fresh scented breeze from you, love of my life, passes through this transparent empty breathing shape of mine. There must be tears as dew drops in heaven, feel the fine moisture mist filling weightless colors, your breasts just a breath away.

Gerrit Slembrouck

Valentines day, February 14, 2010