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Kristian Bang Foss – Denmark

Døden kører audi (2012)

Death Drives an Audi

Publishing House **Gyldendal**

Biography

Kristian Bang Foss was born in Denmark in 1977. After initially starting a BA in mathematics and physics, he graduated from the Danish Writers' Academy in 2003.

His first novel *Fiskens vindue* (*The Window of the Fish*) was published in 2004 and impressed reviewers with its linguistic style and accurate depiction of seemingly ordinary everyday actions and pursuits. His début was followed by *Stormen i 99* (*The Storm in 99*) in 2008, which takes place in an ordinary workplace environment that, with wonderful black humour, becomes the epicentre for slandering, games of power and a variety of absurd events.

In his winning novel *Døden kører Audi* – which, in its absurdly humorous style, uses characteristics from the traditional 'on the road' novel – he tells a satirical tale about the Danish welfare state and takes its characters on a trip through Europe to Morocco in search of a healer.

Synopsis

Asger lives with his girlfriend and her daughter in Copenhagen and works for an advertising agency. It's 2008, the credit crunch has just begun to bite, and after leading a catastrophic campaign, Asger is fired. He spends his days lying on the sofa, developing problems with both his weight and alcohol. His girlfriend breaks up with him and he moves to a flat in Sydhavn, losing contact with everybody. Half a year later, he is forced to take on a job as a disabilities carer in Stentofte, a dreary concrete suburb of Copenhagen, looking after a sick man called Waldemar. Their daily life together is a study in hopelessness. But Waldemar has a plan: he wants to go and see a healer in Morocco. Asger is sceptical, but nevertheless he helps Waldemar raise money for the journey, and after a while the two friends find themselves on a road trip through Europe. However, they are being followed by a person in a black Audi – and as they get closer to Morocco, the trip turns into a race with death.

Døden kører audi

Kristian Bang Foss

Et andet udtryk, som vi var glade for, var „høje puder til sideliggere“. Vi samlede det op på en tur i Ikea, hvor Waldemar skulle have en ny lampe. Det stod på et fuldstændig dumt diagram i sengeafdelingen, hvor man ud fra sin sovestilling – ryggen, maven, siden, etc. – kunne finde ud af, hvilken størrelse pude man skulle have. Vi sagde det konstant, det udkonkurrerede drømmeguf i en periode, og da vi blev trætte af bare at sige, høje puder til sideliggere, og af at spørge I forretningerne, vi kom ind i, om de havde høje puder til sideliggere, begyndte vi på små variationer over temaet, og en samtale som denne kunne udspille sig:

- Skal du snart have ny pude, Waldemar?
- Jeps.
- Hvor høj skal puden være?
- Den skal være sygt høj.
- Hvorfor?
- Fordi jeg er sideligger.

En dag kulminerede det i, at vi ansøgte kommunen om en højere pude til Waldemar. Begrundelsen var, at han havde opdaget, at han var sideligger. Sagsbehandleren ville se dokumentation fra lægen, og vi fik Waldemars læge til at skrive en erklæring om, at Waldemar af helbredsmæssige grunde måtte have en høj pude. Og så fik vi vores pudemæssige carte blanche fra kommunen og tog ud i Ikea, og vi havde aftalt, at

Waldemar skulle sige, mit navn er Waldemar, og jeg er sideligger, og jeg vil gerne bede om den højeste pude, I har.

Ude foran Ikea røg vi en joint. Da Waldemar rullede mod skydedøren i sin kørestol med mig ved siden af, og glasset gled til side med en hvislen, sagde jeg, kan du høre det, Waldemar? Det er dørene til pudehimlen, der åbner sig på vid gab.

På vejen til afdelingen med puder og dyner og den slags, kom vi igennem møbeludstillingen, og specielt var der én stol, der fangede vores opmærksomhed, fordi den hed Boliden, og jeg råbte, se, de har en stol, der hedder Bol-i-den, og vi hulkede begge to af grin, og jeg måtte sætte mig I stolen og sunde mig et minut. Så kom der et ægtepar i slutningen af trediverne, der så usigeligt selvhøjtidelige ud, og som tydeligvis overvejede at købe en Boliden, så jeg rejste mig for at lade dem betragte den i fred, og sagde, det er en dejlig stol, men de værdigede os ikke et svar. I badeværelsesafdelingen kiggede jeg mig i spejlet. Mine øjne var røde af hashen.

Da vi fandt en ekspedient at henvende os til i sengeafdelingen, holdt Waldemar sig ikke helt til manuskriptet, men det gjorde det kun endnu bedre, han sagde, har I høje puder?

Og ekspedienten, en mand i midten af tyverne, som af en eller anden grund var utrolig energisk, sagde, vi er rigtig stærke i puder, og det svar tog helt pusten fra Waldemar og mig, og da vi ikke sagde no- get, og jeg måtte vende mig bort og bide mig i læben, sagde ekspedienten, hvor høj skal den være?

– Tårnhøj, sagde Waldemar, jeg er nemlig sideligger, og så fik han nogle mærkelige trækninger i ansigtet, og der rullede tårer ned ad hans kinder, men ekspedienten ignorerede det, han troede nok, det var en del af hans handicap, og sagde, følg med mig, og mens vi gik, sagde han, der er jo også spørgsmålet om fyldet.

Efter pudekøbet spiste vi kötbullar I kantinen, og Walde-
mar insisterede på, at hans nye pude skulle ligge på bordet, og
at tallerknen med kötbullar skulle stå oven på puden, og den
blev eleveret så meget, at han dårligt kunne nå, og det kun var
hans øjne, der stak op over tallerknen.

- Det er eddermaneme en høj pude, sagde jeg.
- Det er en rigtig sideliggerpude.
- Du brækker nakken, hvis du vender dig i søvne.
- Sådan vil vi sideliggere have det.

Og sådan blev vi ved.

Den trang til at gentage et mantra hidrørte fra, at vi jo til-
bragte så enorme mængder tid sammen med at lave ingenting,
eller i hvert fald med at lave ting, der kun lå få hårsbredder
fra at være det rene ingenting. At vi måtte udfylde tiden med
ekskursioner ud i byen efter overflødige ting, som ingen
levende havde brug for, at vi måtte gøre rent i lejligheden,
selvom den i forvejen var ren, at vi måtte på posthuset og
indbetale husleje til et hjem, der ikke var et hjem, men en
fjende af alt liv, og når så tomheden en gang imellem truede
med at bryde igennem den ganske tynde fernis, vi konstant
malede den over med via vores tåbelige gøremål, hjalp det at
sige noget endnu mere tåbeligt, det manede tomheden væk.
Jo, der var et element af horror vacui over det, som når hånd-
værkere fløjter eller skruer højt op for transistoren, men det
var også et modangreb, og ingen steder syntes vi, ondskaben
og hykleriet var så tydeligt, som i en sætning som høje puder
til sideliggere; vi så den konsekvente pervertering af alt, og
så kunne vi ikke gøre andet end at le. Efterhånden som vi
udviklede denne sære form for selvopholdelseshumor, kunne

et brev fra borgerservice få os til at hikke af grin, når jeg læste det op i det rette tonefald. Ja, med tiden var det, som om man kunne kilde os under fødderne, bare ved at nævne et ord som borgerservice. Vi var for længst ophørt med at være borgere. Og det føjede spot til skade at kalde os det. Vi måtte le.

Så en dag viste det sig, hvad Waldemar havde siddet og pønset på ved computeren. Har du nogensinde været i Marokko? indledte han med at spørge, og jeg sagde, uha nej.

– Men har du hørt om Torbi el Mekki fra Skhirat? sagde Waldemar.

– Min gamle ven Torbi fra Marokko, sagde jeg, selvfølgelig har jeg hørt om Torbi, men Waldemar ignorerede min sarkasme og fortsatte med sin Torbi el Mekki, der viste sig at være en healer, han havde fundet på nettet. Waldemar fortalte, hvordan han havde helbredt mennesker med alvorlige sygdomme, hvordan folk havde smidt deres krykker efter et besøg hos healeren, hvordan de havde kunnet se igen, hvordan de havde kunnet gå.

– Men det er jo bare pis, Waldemar.

– Du kan selv google ham, han er ægte nok.

– Jeg tvivler ikke på, han er ægte. Det er det med, at han skulle kunne kurere noget som helst, jeg ikke tror på.

– Jamen, jeg tror på det... Desuden gør han det gratis. Hvis han var en fupmager, ville han tage penge for det.

– Men synes du ikke, det virker langt ude, at en eller anden mand i Marokko skulle kunne helbrede sygdomme med de bare hænder?

– Nej.

– Jeg ved ikke, hvad jeg skal sige... så dum troede jeg ikke, du var.

Waldemar rejste sig fra sofaen og gik ind i soveværelset og lukkede døren.

Jeg blev siddende og tændte for fjernsynet. Ærgerlig over mig selv og ærgerlig over dumheden. Der blev vist Extreme Makeover. Efter ti minutters tid var Waldemar stadig ikke kommet ud. Jeg rejste mig og gik over og bankede på døren.

– Ham der din ven i Marokko, sagde jeg.

– Om ikke andet kunne det jo være en god tur derned.

– Jeg tager et kørekort og kører derned alene, svarede han ud gennem den lukkede dør.

– Jamen, jeg vil gerne med. Vi kan tage en færge fra Gibraltar.

Der var stille derindefra et stykke tid.

– Gibraltar, det lyder vildt.

Jeg lavede kaffe, og vi satte os ved sofabordet og planlagde.

– Det første, vi skal gøre, er at søge kommunen, sagde Waldemar.

– Hvad skal vi søge om?

– Løn til dig, blandt andet, og tilskud til en bil. Der er mange ting.

– Har du nogen penge sparet op?

– Jeg har ti tusinde.

– Jeg få jo stadig min løn, selvom vi tager af sted, og jeg kan låne penge af en af mine venner, så jeg har lidt ekstra. Hvis

vi dropper det med kommunen, kan vi være af sted allerede næste uge.

- Det er dumt at gå glip af tilskud, hvis vi kan få det.
- Det kommer til at tage en evighed.
- Tre uger, sagde Waldemar, og holdt tre fingre I vejret, maks tre uger. Vi skal jo også have skaffet en bil.

Jeg opgav foreløbig at forstå Waldemars pludselige stålsathed på en ide, der virkede, om ikke grebet ud af den blå luft – han havde jo åbenbart siddet og researchet på internettet – så i hvert fald en smule tilfældig. Og på trods af, at jeg følte en meget stærk fjendtlighed på grænsen til had mod den healer nede i Marokko og alt, hvad han stod for, var jeg selv ivrig efter at komme af sted. Jeg var desperat efter et hvilket som helst initiativ, der kunne bryde min pendlen mellem trøstesløshedens to poler: min lejlighed i Sydhavnen og min arbejdsplads i Stentofte. Og så gik det også op for mig, at der faktisk var en del af Waldemars plan, jeg forstod til fulde: Det drejede sig om at komme væk. Langt væk.

Death Drives an Audi

Kristian Bang Foss

Translated from the Danish by Paul Russell Garrett

Another expression we were fond of was “plump pillows for side sleepers”. We picked it up in Ikea, on a trip to get Waldemar a new lamp. We discovered it on a completely geniotic diagram in the bedroom department, where, depending on your sleeping position – on your back, stomach, side, etc. – you could find out which size pillow you should be using. We repeated it constantly; it even ousted dreamsweets for a time. When we got tired of just saying, ‘plump pillows for side sleepers,’ and of asking in shops if they had plump pillows for side sleepers, we began to make small variations on the theme, and the conversation would go something like this:

‘Are you going to buy a new pillow soon, Waldemar?’

‘Yep.’

‘How plump is the pillow going to be?’

‘It’s going to be disgustingly plump.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I’m a side sleeper.’

One day, it went so far that we actually petitioned the council to get Waldemar a plumper pillow. Our reasoning was that he had just discovered he was a side sleeper. The case handler wanted to see documentation, so we had Waldemar’s doctor write a declaration that he needed a plump pillow on health grounds. And when the council gave us *carte blanche* for

pillow-buying, we took a trip to Ikea. We agreed that Waldemar should say, 'My name is Waldemar, I'm a side sleeper and I would like the plumpest pillow you've got.'

In front of Ikea, we smoked a joint. Waldemar rolled his wheelchair towards the automatic doors; the glass slid away with a whistle and I stood by his side saying, 'Do you hear that Waldemar? That's the door to pillow heaven opening wide.'

On our way to the department with pillows and duvets and all that, we passed through the furniture showroom, where one chair in particular caught our attention. It was called the Jerker and I shouted, 'Look, they've got a chair called the Jerker!' We both cried with laughter and I had to sit in the chair for a minute to recover. A couple in their late thirties came by; they looked unspeakably self-important and were clearly considering buying a Jerker, so I got up to let them study it in peace. I said, 'That's a lovely chair,' but they didn't dignify me with a response. In the bathroom department, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. My eyes were red from the hash.

When we found a salesperson from the bedding department to speak with, Waldemar wandered from the script a little, which only made it better. He asked, 'Do you have plump pillows?'

The salesperson, a man in his mid twenties, who for whatever reason was unbelievably keen said, 'We're very strong in the pillow department.' His answer completely took the wind out of our sails. When Waldemar and I didn't reply and I had to turn away biting my lip, the salesman then asked, 'How plump would you like it?'

'Plump as pudding,' Waldemar said. 'You see, I'm a side sleeper,' and his face began to twitch strangely and tears

rolled down his cheeks but the salesman ignored it. He must have thought it was related to his disability and said, 'Follow me,' and as we walked, he said, 'Of course, it's all a question of the filling.'

After the pillow purchase, we ate Swedish meatballs in the canteen with Waldemar insisting that his new pillow should stay on the table and that his plate of meatballs should rest on top of it. He could hardly reach it, it was so high, and only his eyes stuck out above the plate.

'That is one damned plump pillow,' I said.

'It's a proper side sleepers' pillow.'

'You'll break your neck if you roll over in your sleep.'

'That's how we side sleepers like it.'

And we carried on like this.

The urge to repeat this mantra stemmed from spending enormous amounts of time together doing nothing, or at least doing things that were only a few hair widths away from being absolutely nothing. Forced to pass the time by going on out-of-town excursions, searching for unnecessary items which no living person had any use for, having to clean the flat even though it was already clean, having to go to the post office to pay the rent for a home that wasn't a home but an enemy of all things living and so on the odd occasion when the emptiness threatened to break through the terribly thin veneer which we were constantly painting over with our ridiculous goings-on, it helped to say something even more ridiculous; it kept the emptiness at bay. Yes, there was an element of horror vacui to it, like when tradesmen whistle or turn their transistor radio up high, but it was

also a counterattack. For us, nowhere was wickedness and hypocrisy more evident than in a sentence such as plump pillows for side sleepers; we saw the consistent perversion of everything and we could do nothing but laugh. As this specific form of self-preservation humour developed, a simple letter from the citizen's bureau could make us convulse with laughter, just by reading it out in the right tone. Yes, over time it was as though simply saying citizen's bureau was like tickling the bottom of our feet. We had long since ceased to be citizens. It added insult to injury to call us that. We had to laugh.

One day Waldemar revealed what he had been plotting on his computer. He began by asking, 'Have you ever been to Morocco?' and I said, 'God no.'

'But have you heard of Torbi el Mekki from Skhirat?' Waldemar said.

'My old friend Torbi from Morocco,' I replied, 'of course I've heard of Torbi.' Waldemar ignored my sarcasm and went on with his Torbi el Mekki, who turned out to be some healer he'd found on the internet. Waldemar described how the man had healed people with serious illnesses, how people had cast aside their crutches after a visit with this healer, how they'd regained their sight, how they could walk again.

'But you know that's just nonsense, Waldemar.'

'You can google him yourself, he's real enough.'

'I don't doubt that he's real. It's just the bit about him being able to cure anything at all, that I don't believe.'

'Well, I believe it... besides, he does it for free. If he was a fraud, he'd ask for money.'

‘But don’t you think it seems farfetched, that some man in Morocco is able to cure diseases with his bare hands?’

‘No.’

‘I don’t know what to say... I didn’t think you were that stupid.’

Waldemar got up from the sofa, went into his bedroom and closed the door.

I stayed in my seat and turned on the TV. Annoyed with myself and annoyed with the stupidity. Extreme Makeover was on. After ten minutes, Waldemar still hadn’t come out. I got up, walked over to his door and knocked.

‘About this fellow, your friend in Morocco,’ I said. ‘If nothing else, it could be a nice trip.’

‘I’ll get my driver’s permit and drive down there by myself,’ he answered through the closed door.

‘Well, I want to go with you. We can take the ferry from Gibraltar.’

For a while, it was quiet inside.

‘Gibraltar, that sounds wild.’

I made coffee and we sat at the table making plans.

‘The first thing to do is to apply to the council,’ Waldemar said.

‘What are we applying for?’

‘Your wages, among other things, and money for a car. Lots of things.’

‘Have you got any money saved up?’

‘I’ve got ten thousand.’

‘I’ll still get paid if we go and I can borrow money from one of my friends, so that’s a bit more. If we drop this thing with the council, we can leave as early as next week.

‘It’s stupid to miss out on benefits if we can get them.’

‘It’s going to take forever.’

‘Three weeks,’ Waldemar said holding three fingers in the air, ‘three weeks max. We still have to find a car.’

For the time being, I gave up on understanding Waldemar’s sudden determination to follow through on an idea that seemed, if not to have appeared out of nowhere – apparently he had done his research on the internet – then at least to be a little random. Despite feeling a very strong dislike, bordering on hate, towards this Moroccan healer and everything he stood for, I was still eager to leave. I was desperate for any sort of initiative that could break my commute between my twin poles of desolation: my flat in Sydhavn and my workplace in Stentofte. Then it dawned on me, there was actually a part of Waldemar’s plan which I understood completely. The part about getting away. Far away.



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